Quest Journals
Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science
Volume 14 ~ Issue 3 (March 2026) pp: 118-128
ISSN(Online):2321-9467
www.questjournals.org

Research Paper

The Abiku as Postcolonial Condition: Spectral Cycles and the Violence of Unbecoming in Soyinka's Mythopoeia

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ABSTRACT: *This deconstruction of Wole Soyinka's "Abiku" theorizes the spirit-child as a nexus of ontological, political, and epistemic crises. Deploying a theoretical synthesis of Soyinkan mythopoetics, Johan Galtung's structural violence, and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, the study first posits the Abiku as an entity of radical ontological unfixity, whose cyclical existence dismantles the binaries of life/death and human/spirit, revealing a "liminal ecology" where the landscape itself is an agential, spectral accomplice. This instability is then mapped onto the necropolitical allegory of the postcolonial nation-state, wherein the poem diagnoses a condition of recursive state failure—a stillborn polity trapped in cycles of promise and self-destruction, enacting a "slow violence" of attritional trauma upon its citizenry. The analysis further identifies a profound structural violence of intimacy in the Abiku's cold indifference, framing its betrayal as an endogenous, autoimmune disorder of the social body, representing a categorical refusal of the integrative, Ogunian synthesis. Finally, the poem is read as a site of epistemic resistance, where the Abiku's riddling, non-linear logic and its alliance with a haunted, agential landscape archive subvert anthropocentric rituals of knowledge and control. Collectively, the essay argues that "Abiku" articulates a cosmology where stability is a fleeting exception, perpetually undone by the collaborative resonance between a liminal being and a traitorous earth.*

KEYWORDS: *Abiku, necropolitics, Yoruba cosmology, structural violence, Soyinkan dialectics, postcolonial allegory*

*Received 13 Mar., 2026; **R**evised 25 Mar., 2026; **A**ccepted 27 Mar., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.*
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I. INTRODUCTION

The established catena posited between the Abiku[1] (1) trope and Africa's socio-political and economic trajectories constitutes a critical hermeneutic for diagnosing postcolonial stasis and cyclical regression. This metaphoric constellation, wherein the nation-state is analogised to the Yoruba spirit-child, a capricious entity caught between ontological realms, repeatedly dying and being reborn, thereby frustrating linear progression and eschewing sustained development, has evolved into a potent discursive framework. Its scholarly articulation finds seminal expression in Ben Okri's seminal, almost oracular, declaration: "Our country is an Abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going" (2). This conceptualization, as Kamalu (3) elucidates, operates not merely as descriptive cultural allusion but as a trenchant "negative evaluation" of the Nigerian (and by synecdoche, the broader African) postcolonial polity, indicting its foundational precarity and recursive failures.

Consequently, this critical nexus has been productively foregrounded across an interdisciplinary spectrum, transcending the boundaries of literary exegesis to inform political theory, sociological analysis, and historical critique. Scholars have deployed the Abiku trope as a sophisticated analytical instrument to dissect the continent's underwhelmingly haphazard and checkered developmental patterns, characterized not by classical teleological advancement but by a haunting periodicity of collapse and renewal that yields no cumulative legacy [(4), (5), (6), (7)]. Investigations proliferate through methodologies of thematic inference, discerning in narratives of national promise and subsequent betrayal the archetypal Abiku cycle of covenant and abandonment [(8), (9), (10)]. Simultaneously, linguistic deconstructions probe the rhetoric of political manifestos and state propaganda,

revealing a lexicon of birth and rebirth that mirrors, yet perverts, the myth's structure, promising permanence where only ephemerality exists (11).

Furthermore, cultural hermeneutics engages the trope to interpret collective traumas, coups, economic collapses, civil conflicts, not as isolated historical aberrations but as performative iterations of a deeper, culturally-encoded destiny of arrested becoming [(12), (13)]. The Abiku, in this sophisticated deployment, ceases to be a folkloric relic and transforms into a diagnostic meta-symbol for structural and epistemic conditions: the protracted colonial wound, the failures of nationalist bourgeois projects, the allure of charismatic yet ultimately treacherous leadership, and the resilience of patrimonial systems that replicate the spirit-child's cyclical returns. Thus, the trope's enduring scholarly foregrounding, from Soliman (14) to Ogunrotimi et al. (15), affirms its hermeneutic puissance in rendering legible the paradoxical temporality of the African postcolony, a space perpetually caught in the throes of a painful, recurrent nascence, forever arriving yet never truly born.

The literary and intellectual project of Wole Soyinka constitutes a formidable endeavour to synthesise a distinct aesthetic and philosophical vocabulary for the African postcolonial condition, one that resolutely repudiates the epistemological binarisms imposed by colonial discourse. Within this expansive corpus, his poetic work offers a uniquely concentrated locus for interrogating the inter-animation of metaphysics and political reality. This study posits that his poem "Abiku" functions as a sophisticated mythopoeic system, through which Soyinka dramatises the existential and political contours of a nascent nation-state grappling with the violent legacies of colonialism and the fraught project of self-actualisation. Central to this system is a strategic deployment of a Yoruba-derived cosmological framework, which conceptualises being and becoming not as linear progressions but as processes governed by fundamental cycles of dissolution and return. This investigation argues that in "Abiku," Soyinka constructs a potent metaphysical allegory wherein the ontology of the spirit-child, its liminality, cyclicality, and defiance of human order, provides the primary symbolic lexicon for diagnosing the traumas, aporias, and necropolitical logics of a sovereignty in crisis.

The postcolony, within a Soyinkan cosmogony, is never a tabula rasa upon which a new history can be innocently inscribed. It is, rather, an already convoluted and haunted landscape, a palimpsest where the scars of colonial disruption overlay deeper strata of indigenous cosmologies. As Achille Mbembe theorizes, this space is characterised by a "time of entanglement" and "interlocking" of multiple, often incommensurate, temporalities (16). The Abiku spirit, with its defining call "for the first / And the repeated time," (lines 3-4) embodies this very entanglement, its cyclical recurrence fracturing the linear historicity upon which modernist nation-building depends. Deciphering this complex reality thus necessitates a theoretical synthesis that accounts for both the material violence of historical experience and the enduring, agential power of metaphysical worldviews. This analysis is therefore situated at the critical convergence of political theory and the study of indigenous knowledge systems, aiming to interpret the poem's mythic structure as a diagnostic apparatus for the postcolonial condition.

This perspective is rigorously framed by Mbembe's theorisation of the "necropolitical," wherein contemporary sovereignty is fundamentally expressed through "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (17). In the allegorical reading advanced here, the Abiku becomes the spectral embodiment of a state whose power is necrotic rather than vital. Its operations do not foster collective life but administer a form of social existence constitutively oriented toward death and recurrence. The Abiku-state's cold, rhetorical interrogation — "Must I weep for goats and cowries?" (line 5) — dismisses the biopolitical foundations of its populace, presiding instead over a harvest of harm. Its cyclical returns mirror a political logic of recursive failure, where each constitutional inception or democratic renewal proves abortive, condemning the polity to a haunted repetition of its own dissolution. However, to apply this theoretical framework as an external imposition would be to replicate the very epistemic disruption Soyinka's work militates against. Its explanatory power is drastically augmented only when brought into a critical dialogue with the internal coherence of Yoruba cosmology, particularly as interpreted by Soyinka himself in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (18).

It is within this indigenous epistemological framing that the Abiku's full allegorical significance is unlocked. The spirit's ontological condition (its permanent liminality between *ayé* - the world of the living, and *òrun*, the realm of the spirits), translates into a political metaphor of a state that belongs wholly to no emancipatory project, eternally suspended between the promise of sovereignty and the reality of subjugation. Its alliance with the mysterious "ambiance" of the "other world" and the "transitory" structurality of the world signifies an allegiance not to the cultivated civic sphere but to the chaotic, primordial forces that perpetually threaten the cleared space of the polis. Furthermore, the poem articulates a profound violence of intimacy. The Abiku's is not an external coloniser but a native-born entity whose betrayals are endogenous, mirroring the citizenry's betrayal by a state that is part of them yet operates by an alien, destructive logic. This betrayal is compounded by a stance of epistemic refusal. The spirit's riddling language ("the squirrel teeth, cracked / The riddle of the palm" lines 13-14) and its subversion of human semiotics ("charmed circles" line 2) represent a rejection of the integrative, socialising narratives upon which state legitimacy depends.

This introduction establishes the grounds for a tripartite analysis of Soyinka's "Abiku." First, it will examine the poem's construction of a metaphysical and political liminality, arguing that the spirit's ontological

unfixity provides the precise template for understanding the postcolonial state's unstable sovereignty. Second, it will analyse the poem as a necropolitical allegory, where the cyclical logic of the Abiku diagnoses a governance of recursive failure and the management of social death. Finally, it will explore the poem's articulation of intimate betrayal and epistemic resistance, contending that the spirit's cold indifference and hermeneutic defiance model the state's endogenous violence and its rejection of hegemonic narratives of progress. Through this layered examination, this study will demonstrate how "Abiku" employs a mythic framework to map a complex topography of postcolonial becoming, suggesting that any viable political future must first confront the spectral recurrences of a traumatic past that is woven into the very fabric of its metaphysical imagination.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical reception of Wole Soyinka's oeuvre has extensively engaged with his dramatic work, yet his poetic output constitutes a significant, if sometimes overshadowed, pillar of his intellectual project. Scholarship on his poem "Abiku" has generated a sophisticated and multi-stranded body of criticism, evolving from foundational mythocultural analyses towards increasingly complex formalist, linguistic, and politically inflected readings. This review synthesises the extant literary criticism pertaining to "Abiku," tracing these interpretive trajectories and identifying a critical interstice in the ecological and materialist understanding of the poem that the present study seeks to address.

The foundational stratum of scholarship securely anchors Soyinka's "Abiku" within its Yoruba cosmological and cultural context. This approach treats the poem not as a free-standing literary artifact but as a deliberate intervention within a dense field of indigenous belief and oral tradition, aligning with Jeyifo's deconstructive assertion that "Abiku" is "part of the great metaphysical cycle of rebirth and death, creation and destruction, transience and eternity" (19). A pivotal contribution in this vein is McCabe's (20) research, which situates Soyinka's text within a continuum of Yoruba and Nigerian cultural expressions concerning the Abiku phenomenon. McCabe argues that a full appreciation of the poem requires an understanding of its inheritance from traditional narratives and invocatory rituals, even as Soyinka reframes these elements through his distinct modernist sensibility and historical consciousness. This work establishes the poem as a site of cultural translation, where a pre-colonial epistemic framework is mobilised to confront postcolonial realities. Comparative studies, such as Amoussou's (21) linguistic analysis and Oduola and Olajuyigbe's (22) narratological examination, extend this contextual grounding by placing Soyinka's "Abiku" in dialogue with J.P. Clark's (23) canonical treatment of the same motif.[2] These comparative analyses reveal how divergent deployments of tense, mood, modality, and narrative structure encode distinct ideological and existential stances, with Soyinka's version consistently interpreted as emphasising a-temporality, autonomy, and a more metaphysical, rather than solely societal, confrontation with cyclical recurrence.

Building upon this cultural grounding, a second, robust trajectory of scholarship applies rigorous linguistic and stylistic frameworks to dissect the poem's formal architecture. This approach shifts the emphasis from cultural source to literary execution, analysing how Soyinka's linguistic choices construct the poem's unique worldview. Tsavmbu's (24) study is illustrative, as it innovatively blends Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar with literary criticism to map participant relationships within the poem. By analysing transitivity and modality, Tsavmbu demonstrates how Soyinka's linguistic strategy systematically foregrounds Abiku spirit's agential dominance and ontological separation from the human community, thus using grammar to enact a metaphysics of alienation. This formalist inquiry is complemented by work such as that of Faniran and Adetuyi (25), which focuses on the poem's structural and aesthetic features (its diction, imagery, rhythm, and rhetorical patterning) to argue that its thematic tensions around death, power, and cyclical time are inextricable from its formal ingenuity. Collectively, these studies affirm that "Abiku" is a tightly engineered verbal construct, where meaning is produced as much through syntactic arrangement and lexical selection as through mythological allusion.

The extant literature on Soyinka's "Abiku" reveals a field rich in contextual, formal, and increasingly political insight. Scholars have successfully decoded its mythological substrates, deconstructed its linguistic fabric, and gestured towards its sociopolitical resonances. However, a significant critical lacuna persists at the intersection of these approaches. The potent alignment between the Abiku's cyclical violence and the structural, recurring failures of the polity, a form of recursive political violence, has not been fully theorised in terms of its mythic-ritual ecological embodiment. Similarly, the poem's haunting natural imagery presents a fertile, yet unused, ground for examining Achille Mbembe's (26) concept of the "necropolitical" through a cultural allegory, where sovereignty is exercised over life and death within a contested and symbolically charged landscape.

Consequently, the full integrative potency of Soyinka's vision, in which the fate of the land and the fate of the polity are rendered as inextricably intertwined within a singular mythopoetic system, has not been fully articulated. This study seeks to address this deficit. It argues that "Abiku" constructs a sentient and symbolic ecology, where the natural world is an active, metaphysically charged agent in a drama of ontological and political crisis. By synthesising the existing cultural and formal insights with a framework that treats the terrestrial as an

allegorical actor, this analysis proposes a new synthesis: that Soyinka's poem offers a profound geomorphic allegory for the postcolonial condition, diagnosing its traumas through a symbolic lexicon in which the postcolonial ecology (apotheosized in the Abiku's being), becomes a complicit terrain, witnessing, enabling, and metaphorically constituting the state of necropolitical entrapment.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SYNTHESISING SOYINKAN MYTHOPOETICS, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE, AND THE NEO POLITICAL

This inquiry constructs a triadic hermeneutic apparatus, designed to excavate the profound inter-animation of ontology, power, and materiality constitutive of Wole Soyinka's poetic articulation, "Abiku." The framework is deliberately and resolutely tripartite, orchestrating a critical interlocution rather than a monolithic theoretical imposition. It posits that the poem's diagnostic potency emerges precisely from the generative friction and fusion between an autochthonous, cyclical epistemology and the globalised exigencies of (post)colonial eco-modernity. This methodological stance is integrative, not additive, operating as a dynamic interpretive circuit. Each theoretical vector illuminates a discrete stratum of the text, while their collective synergy discloses the holism of Soyinka's philosophical-political vision, wherein being and sovereignty are rendered ontologically coterminous. The object of analysis is the poem itself, its imagery, its speaker's voice, its structural repetitions, as the primary site where these grand theoretical narratives are condensed into a potent lyrical economy.

The indispensable primary scaffold is Soyinkan Mythopoetics, derived from the author's own critical corpus, principally *Myth, Literature and the African World* (27). This constitutes not a mere thematic allusion but a foundational epistemological commitment to engaging the internal logic of Soyinka's artistic system. At its hermeneutic core resides the archetype of Ogun, the Yoruba orișà of iron, rupture, creativity, and the road. Soyinka conceptualizes Ogun as the quintessential dialectical principle, whose volitional plunge into the primal, chaotic gulf (igbo irunmole) establishes the cosmological template for all transformative human endeavor: the "compulsive, catastrophic act of will" (28) requisite for bridging existential divides and forging integrative pathways. This Ogunian paradigm institutes a non-teleological, cyclical model of history and being, wherein regeneration is necessarily predicated on a prior, violent cleavage. Crucially, it defines a spectrum of existential outcomes: successful navigation of the transitional abyss yields integration; its failure results in stasis or sterile recurrence. In this schema, the "Abiku" entity embodies the antithesis of the Ogunian synthesis. It is a consciousness perpetually arrested in the chaotic limbo of transition, refusing the integrative closure of the road and the mortal legacy it enables. The mythopoetic lens thus decrypts the poem's symbolic landscape: the "charmed circle" becomes the bounded, non-progressive space of this failed transition; the spirit's reiterated "I am" declarations signify a defiant but static ontology; and its cyclical returns manifest a metaphysics of arrested development, a being constitutionally oriented against the linearity of growth, memory, and genealogical continuity.

To tether this cosmological reading to the concrete materialities of the postcolony, the framework incorporates an analytic of Structural Violence, as theorized by Johan Galtung (29). This perspective furnishes an essential vocabulary for examining the attritional, often invisible political machinery of colonial and neo-colonial dispossession, systems that harm populations indirectly by structurally inhibiting the fulfillment of fundamental human needs. Its aptness for interpreting "Abiku" is profound. The poem's central drama (the spirit's repetitive departure and return, inflicting recurrent grief upon the supplicant community) transmutes into a potent allegory for the recursive, systemic violence of a political order engineered to administer cyclical trauma rather than foster sustained life. The Abiku's chilling rhetorical interrogation, "Must I weep for goats and cowries? / For palm oil and the sprinkled ash?" (lines 5-6) performs a sovereign dismissal of bio-political sustenance, reducing ritual offerings meant to secure life to objects of contempt. The resulting "harvest," then, is not of nourishment but of the "sickle" and "harm" deferred and dispersed by this embedded, neglectful structure. This lens ensures the poem's mythic architecture is never an evasion of the political but is instead its deep diagnostic anatomy, rendering palpable the otherwise imperceptible rhythms of a crisis engineered into the socio-political fabric.

Finally, to articulate the precise modalities of sovereign power that govern existence within this allegorical terrain, the study engages Necropolitical Theory, principally as advanced by Achille Mbembe. Building upon but critically extending Foucauldian bio-power, Mbembe theorizes contemporary sovereignty as the ultimate prerogative to dictate "who may live and who must die" and to fabricate "death-worlds," defined as "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (30). This framework is indispensable for deciphering the political ontology of Soyinka's Abiku. The spirit's existence (spectral, recursive, and fundamentally alienated from the linear progression of human growth and legacy) is a precise poetic rendering of a citizenry subjected to necropolitical management. The Abiku's state, allegorized through the spirit's own voice, does not nurture; it permits only a form of life constitutively oriented toward repetitive death, a being-in-cycles that is a being-toward-death. Mbembe's theory thus provides the political nomenclature for the existential stasis Soyinka depicts, revealing

how the Ogunian cycle, when perverted by a necropolitical logic, becomes a closed, self-consuming system where destructive rupture is no longer a prelude to creation but a permanent, sterile condition of "coming and going."

In synthesis, this tripartite framework is essential for a comprehensive deconstruction of "Abiku." Soyinkan mythopoetics provides the internal cosmological structure and symbolic lexicon, positioning the Abiku as an anti-Ogunian figure of failed transition. The analysis of structural violence traces the political logic of the recursive trauma allegorized in the poem's relentless cycles of promise and loss. Necropolitical theory names the structures of sovereign power that produce and maintain such cycles of living death, translating the spirit's metaphysical condition into a biopolitical sentence. By holding these dimensions in constant, dialogic tension, this analysis demonstrates that the enduring puissance of Soyinka's poem lies in its capacity to reveal how the grand cycles of myth are lived and endured in the scarred subjectivities of the postcolony. It is at this critical juncture, where the chthonic realm of Yoruba cosmology meets the recursive violence of the political order and the absolute power of the necropolitical state, that "Abiku" generates its most profound insights into the arrested condition of postcolonial becoming.

IV. The Abiku as Postcolonial Condition: Spectral Cycles and the Violence of Unbelonging in Soyinka's Mythopoeia

"Abiku" stands as a profound and unsettling pillar within Wole Soyinka's poetic corpus, a definitive exploration of the logic of arrested dialectics. The Abiku, in Yoruba cosmology, is a preternatural being, a child spirit who cycles between the world of the living (ayé) and the world of the dead (òrun), causing repeated grief to its mother by dying young only to be reborn again to the same parents. Where a productive dialectic seeks synthesis, "Abiku" dwells in the space of a terrifying, sterile recurrence. A deep analysis reveals the poem as a powerful allegory for the traumatic cycles of the postcolonial condition, the spectral nature of a thwarted national identity, and the violent intimacy of a world where the boundaries between the human, the spirit, and the land are perpetually, and painfully, porous.

4.1 Ontological Unfixity and the Contestation of Enchanted Space: A Deconstruction of Liminal Ecology in Soyinka's "Abiku"

Wole Soyinka's "Abiku" commences not with a declaration of being, but with a negation of human efficacy:

> In vain your bangles cast
> Charmed circles at my feet (Lines 1-2)

This opening salvo immediately establishes the poem's central ontological conflict, positioning the poets' persona Abiku as an entity whose existence is fundamentally illegible and unconfinable within the anthropocentric frameworks of ritual and symbolism. The "charmed circles," (line 2) geometrically perfect and culturally sanctioned, represent an epistemological and spatial project: an attempt to impose hermeneutic closure upon a being defined by radical openness. The circle, a universal symbol of unity, eternity, and protection, is here rendered obsolete, its magic nullified by the Abiku constitutive transgression of such boundedness. This failure signals more than ritual impotence; it inaugurates a deconstruction of the very possibility of a disenchanted, secure human domain. The Abiku exists in a state of perpetual ontological unfixity, a sustained and deliberate interstitiality between the phenomenal world of the living (ayé) and the noumenal realm of the spirits (òrun). Its ecology is thus inherently liminal, not a passive backdrop but an active, agential field that mirrors and enables this unfixed state.

Soyinka meticulously engineers a liminal ecology through a lexicon of amorphous, fluid, and viscous imagery, materially substantiating the Abiku's metaphysical indeterminacy. This is not achieved through the pathos of dew and rain, but through a more complex synthesis of organic process, elemental consumption, and geomorphic intimacy. The spirit's ontology is articulated through its relationship with a landscape that is itself animate and mourns: "The ground is wet with mourning" (line 21). Here, moisture is not a mere atmospheric condition but the very exudate of the earth's own sentient grief, a symbiosis of spirit and terrain that eradicates the boundary between environmental state and affective expression. This inherent, weeping dampness of the world forms a foundational contrast to the anthropic project of desiccation and fixation seen in rituals like "the sprinkled ash" and the violent branding "when the snail is burnt in his shell" (line 9). The snail, an entity of viscous traversal and spiraled, enclosures architecture (a biological cognate to the "charmed circle"), is subjected to a pyro-alchemical transformation meant to inscribe a permanent, legible sigil upon the spirit ("brand me / Deeply on the breast—you must know him / When Abiku calls again" lines 10-12). This endeavor to impose a stable semiotic marker is, however, radically subverted by the Abiku's own auto-definition. It identifies not as a static form but as a destructive and hermeneutic process:

> I am the squirrel teeth, cracked

The riddle of the palm; (Line 13-14)

In this formulation, the spirit embodies the agency that fractures to access nourishment (the squirrel's teeth cracking the nut) and the esoteric, illegible text itself (the palm's riddle). It thus exists as a cryptic force within nature, one that operates through fracture and enigmatic revelation, defying the very logic of fixed identification and asserting its being as a perpetual act of decoding that refuses a final, stable solution.

The landscape in "Abiku" is not merely inhabited; it is consanguineous with the spirit. The Abiku demands to be dug "deeper still into / The god's swollen foot" (lines 15-16), seeking refuge not in a separate spiritual realm but within the very body of the earth deity, within a corporeal geology. This confounds clear distinctions between subject and environment, spirit and matter. The poem's later scenes are saturated with this enchanted, participative ecology: "The ground is wet with mourning" (line 21), suggesting the earth itself empathizes with human grief, while "White dew suckles flesh birds" (line 22), a grotesque and nurturing image that merges elemental moisture, animal life, and perhaps spectral forms. "Evening befriends the spider" (line 23), and "Night, and Abiku sucks the oil / From lamps" (lines 25-26). In these lines, time (evening, night), fauna (spider), and human artifacts (lamps) are all enmeshed in a collaborative, if ominous, network with the spirit. The spider, a weaver of traps from its own body, is a potent analogue for the Abiku's own cyclical weaving of return and dissolution.

This liminal ecology directly contests human projects of spatial and semantic ordering. The "charmed circles" and branded breasts are attempts to create a stable, meaningful, and bounded home through symbolic action. The Abiku, in contrast, represents a relentless counter-worlding force. Its allegiance is to the macabre (death, mourning, violation), night (mystery, in-betweenness, oppression), doorstep (the liminal, suspended between belonging and exclusion, past and future, vulnerability as well as authority), and the "yolk" from which it shapes "mounds." These are spaces and substances of primal, unstructured potential, the liminal, the menacing, the cyclical. They are the antithesis of stability, safety and finality. The "ripest fruit was saddest; / Where I crept, the warmth was cloying" (lines 29-30). Even the apex of natural abundance and nurturance (ripe fruit, warmth) is recast as oppressive and mournful from the Abiku's perspective, for it signifies the very temporal and material stability it must reject. Its moaning occurs in the "silence of webs" (line 31), within the very structures of entanglement it befriends. Thus, the poem presents an ecology that is comprehensively enchanted and partisan. The land is not a neutral territory upon which a drama between human and spirit unfolds; it is an active participant, a co-conspirator that provides sanctuary, sustenance, and gateway for the spirit's transgressions. The human struggle is therefore not against a supernatural intruder, but against the very grain of a cosmos that refuses disenchantment and in which their rituals are but feeble inscriptions upon a perpetually shifting, spectral palimpsest.

This ontological unfixity is ultimately temporal as well as spatial. Abiku's defining call is "for the first / And the repeated time" (lines 3-4), a phrase whose paradoxical grammar ("the repeated time") dismantles linear chronology. It announces a palimpsestic temporality where origin and repetition are coeval, where every return is also a first occurrence. This cyclical time is the rhythm of the liminal ecology itself — the cycle of dew and evaporation, rain and drought, fruiting and decay. Human time, oriented toward growth, harvest, and legacy ("Yams do not sprout in amulets" line 7), is alien to this order. The Abiku's existence is a haunting recurrence, an eternal return that voids linear progress and renders human efforts at accumulation, whether of crops or memory, perpetually provisional. The ecology, in its endless cycles, legitimizes and reinforces this alternative temporality, making the Abiku not an anomaly within nature, but its most authentic and terrifying priest.

4.2 Necropolitical Allegory: The Postcolonial Nation as Abiku Child

Read through the lens of postcolonial critique, Soyinka's "Abiku" transmutes from a mythopoetic exploration into a devastating necropolitical allegory for the nascent nation-state, specifically the Nigerian entity emerging from the wreckage of colonialism into the crises of the 1960s. The Abiku's spirit becomes a potent metaphor for the state itself — an entity whose symbolic birth is repeatedly celebrated but whose political life is chronically stillborn, trapped in a cycle of promised potential and actualized failure. Achille Mbembe's (31) concept of necropolitics, the sovereign power to "dictate life and death," finds a unique inflection here: it describes not only the state's power over its citizens but, more fundamentally, the state's lethal relationship to its own viability. The postcolonial nation is an Abiku-child, greeted at each constitutional moment, each post-coup "new dawn," with the ritualistic investments of a traumatized populace: the "bangles" of hope, the "charms" of legal frameworks and political promises. According to Wright, "the abiku's ambiguous two-way crossing between unborn and living and between living and dead may suggest the new nation's passage into either life or death…." (32)

The poem's opening negation, "In vain," thus echoes the profound disillusionment following independence. The "charmed circles" cast are the elaborate institutions, ideologies, and nationalisms designed to bind the new state to a path of progressive futurity. Their failure is preordained because the state, like the Abiku-child, operates according to a destructive inherent logic. The "same fingers" that midwife each rebirth are also those of internal

corruption, ethno-religious factionalism, militarism, and a patrimonial political culture — the ingrained, self-destructive tendencies that ensure cyclical return to chaos. The state's declaration, "I am Abiku, calling for the first / And the repeated time" (lines 3-4), captures the tragic farce of postcolonial history: each republic, each democratic experiment, is heralded as novel ("the first") yet is hauntingly familiar ("the repeated time"), a recurrent episode in a narrative of arrested development.

This allegory deepens in the poem's shocking rhetorical questions: "Must I weep for goats and cowries / For palm oil and the sprinkled ash?" (lines 5-6) This is the voice of the state or its ruling elite, expressing a cold indifference to the foundational biopolitical needs of its citizens. "Goats and cowries," "palm oil and…ash" symbolize subsistence economy, ritual practice, and social cohesion, the very fabric of communal life. The state's dismissal of these is a necropolitical gesture, withdrawing the basic conditions for life and meaning. The subsequent lines, "Yams do not sprout in amulets / To earth Abiku's limbs" (lines 7-8), are brutally allegorical. The "yams" represent national prosperity, tangible growth, and development. The "amulets" are the empty symbolic gestures, five-year plans, and political sloganeering that substitute for substantive policy. The state (Abiku) admits that real nourishment ("yams") cannot emerge from these talismanic, performative acts; its own "limbs" cannot be earthed, it cannot be grounded in a project of sustainable, life-affirming governance.

The violence enacted is systemic and cyclical, aligning with Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" (33) but with a recursive structure. It is not one catastrophic war, but the attritional trauma of recurring economic collapse, infrastructural decay, and electoral betrayal, the "harvest of your harm" reaped season after season. The poem's imagery of scarring — "whet the heated fragment, brand me / Deeply on the breast" (lines 9-11) — speaks to the desperate, violent attempts to mark and reform the state: military coups, civil war, revolutionary fervor. Yet, even this branding is incorporated into the cycle: "you must know him / When Abiku calls again" (lines 11-12). The scars of past violence become merely identifying marks for the next iteration of failure, not catalysts for transformation.

The Abiku-state's allegiance, crucially, is not to its people but to its spectral "playmates." These are the occulted networks of power: the international financial institutions, the global oil market, the shadowy circuits of corruption, and the "greed of the new" that characterizes a comprador bourgeoisie. It is pulled back into the "way I came" — a path of dependency and extraction — by these forces. The final stanzas present a chilling tableau of this necropolitical order. "Night, and Abiku sucks the oil / From lamps" (line 25). Oil, the literal and metaphorical resource of the modern Nigerian state, is here drained not for light (enlightenment, progress) but by the spectral state itself, plunging the civic space into darkness. The spirit becomes the "suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep / Yours the killing cry" (line 28). The state presents itself as a vulnerable supplicant, yet its very presence provokes a violent, reactive panic from the "Mothers" (the citizenry), who are then implicated in the ensuing chaos. The "ripest fruit" of independence turns "saddest," and the warmth of nationalist solidarity becomes "cloying," choked by disappointment. The Abiku-nation ultimately "moans, shaping / Mounds from the yolk" (lines 31-32), building not living structures but barren grave-mounds from the very substance of potential life. The poem thus stands as a profound allegory for the haunted house of the postcolonial state, where the promise of sovereignty is perpetually stalked by the ghost of its own aborted futures, and where governance is a ritual of managing an endless, cyclical death.

4.3 The Violence of Intimacy and the Refusal of Integration

Beyond its political allegory, "Abiku" articulates a profound metaphysics of alienation, centering on a violence that is terrifying precisely because of its intimacy. The Abiku is not a foreign demon; it is born of the mother, shares her table, and is marked by her rituals. Its destructive power stems from this proximate, familial origin, rendering its cyclical abandonments not as acts of war but as betrayals of the most fundamental bond. This "violence of intimacy" reframes the poem's trauma, moving it from the realm of external horror to that of internal fracture and psychological devastation. The speaker's tone is pivotal: it is not roaring or vengeful but possesses a cold, ancient, and eerily calm indifference. This lack of affective reciprocity, the absence of hatred where love was invested, is itself a form of violence, a negation of the relational logic upon which human community is built.

The poem is replete with images of this intimate violation. The Abiku invades the most domestic of spaces: it "sucks the oil / From lamps" (lines 25-26), draining the very source of hearth-light and security. Its chosen form of return is the "suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep" (line 27), a creature that transgresses the threshold between wild and domestic, danger and sanctuary. Most chillingly, it shapes "Mounds from the yolk" (line 32), perverting the symbol of nascent life (the yolk) into a symbol of burial (mounds), enacting a perverse motherhood upon the substance of its own potentiality. This mirrors the experience of the postcolonial citizenry, betrayed not by a distant colonial power but by a "native" state that consumes their resources, violates their trust, and perverts the promise of self-rule into a tragedy of unfulfilled potential. The violence is endogenous, an autoimmune disorder of the social body.

This dynamic establishes the Abiku as the antithesis of the integrative, synthetic consciousness Soyinka champions elsewhere, most explicitly through the Ogun archetype. In works like "Idanre", the poet achieves a

climactic, hard-won identification: the poetic persona identifies with Ogun's mythic consciousness, collapsing the distance between poet and deity. This signifies the assimilation of destructive and creative forces, the bridging of human and divine realms, and the assumption of a burdensome but generative agency. Ogun's violence is a necessary, catalytic clearing in the primal chaos (*igbo irunmole*) that allows for the construction of roads and communities. The Abiku represents the categorical refusal of such integration. Its defiant cry, "I am the squirrel teeth, cracked / the riddle of the palm" (lines 13-14) is a manifesto of non-assimilation. Its "roots" are not those of family or nation, but of a spectral, liminal cyclical existence. It clings to its ontological disunity, its fractured state, as its defining essence.

The Abiku embodies a consciousness that will not be healed, unified, or socialized. It rejects the linear narrative of growth, maturity, and legacy. Where human society seeks to "earth" its children — to ground them in tradition, responsibility, and continuity — the Abiku actively resists this grounding. The lines "Yams do not sprout in amulets / To earth Abiku's limbs" (lines 7-8), speak to this resistance. The "earthing" is a process of connecting to the soil of human continuity; the Abiku's limbs remain un-earthed, unattached, perpetually mobile and rootless in the human sense. It finds its authenticity only in recursion, in the "way I came" (line 20), a path back to a non-human community of "flesh birds" and befriended spiders.

This refusal makes the Abiku a figure of profound existential pathos as well as terror, "a symbol for cyclical cruelty, cyclical evil and also an expression for some of the enigma of existence, some of the insoluble aspects of existence" (34). Its world is one of silent, cloying warmth and sad ripeness — a paradise it experiences as a prison. Its moaning in the "silence of webs" (line 31) suggests a loneliness and agony inherent to its condition, but an agony it will not trade for the compromises of integration. It is the spirit of eternal adolescence, of potential that refuses to actualize in any stable form, thereby inflicting endless grief upon those who love it. In the context of Soyinka's mythic system, if Ogun represents the tragic hero who embraces contradiction to forge meaning, the Abiku is the anti-hero who embraces fragmentation as meaning itself. It represents not the chaos that is transformed, but the chaos that endures as an active, intimate, and perpetual negation of wholeness. Its violence is the violence of the fragment that insists on remaining a fragment, thereby rending the fabric of any whole that attempts to contain it.

4.4 Epistemic Resistance and the Haunted Landscape as Archive

Soyinka's "Abiku" ultimately stages a profound confrontation between competing epistemologies — ways of knowing, interpreting, and engaging with the world. The human characters in the poem operate within a ritual-symbolic epistemic framework. They cast circles, sprinkle ash, pour libations, and brand with heated fragments. These are acts of knowing-through-controlling: attempts to render the mysterious (Abiku) legible, to fix its identity ("you must know him" line 11), to bind it through symbolic codes and physical marks. Their knowledge is archival and taxonomic; it seeks to inscribe the spirit into a human ledger of causes and effects, a ledger where specific actions (libations, charms) yield predictable results (protection, permanence). The poem systematically demonstrates the failure of this epistemology. The charms are cast "in vain" (line 1). The branding is a futile attempt at permanent identification for a being whose essence is recurrence-in-mutation. Even the pouring of libations backfires: "each finger points me near / The way I came" (lines 19-20). The ritual act meant to appease or integrate instead becomes a signpost directing the spirit back to its cyclical path.

The Abiku embodies and professes a radical epistemology, one rooted in riddling, embodiment, and an intimate communion with a haunted landscape that itself functions as a living, agential archive. Its declaration, "I am the squirrel teeth, cracked / The riddle of the palm" (lines 13-14) is a key epistemic statement. It does not say "I am like" these things; it identifies as them. Its mode of being-knowing is to be the crack, the riddle. It is a knowledge that resides in fracture, in processes of breaking open (the nut), and in enigmatic, non-discursive signs (the palm's patterns). This is knowledge as participation, not observation; as cryptic signification, not clear legibility. The "riddle of the palm" (line 14) alludes both to the palm nut (a source of oil and food, cracked open by the "squirrel teeth") and to palmistry — a form of divination that reads fate from the body's own lines. The Abiku is both the reader and the text, the interpreter and the enigma, collapsing the subject-object distinction upon which rationalist epistemology depends.

This alternative epistemology is housed within the landscape itself, which Soyinka presents not as inert matter but as a sentient, mnemonic archive. The archive here is not of parchment and ink, but of dew, rain, swelling earth, and silent webs. The "ground is wet with mourning" (line 21), archiving grief in its very moisture. The "god's swollen foot" (line 16) is an archive of embodied, geological pressure. The "yolk" is an archive of unrealised life, from which the Abiku shapes the archive of death ("mounds"). This landscape actively collaborates in preserving and enabling the Abiku's cyclical knowledge. Evening "befriends the spider" (line 23), archiving time in webs that trap not just flies but meaning. The "white dew suckles flesh birds" (line 22), archiving a grotesque nurturance. To know the Abiku, one would not consult a human-made ledger, but learn to read this spectral ecology — a task for which human ritual language is profoundly inadequate.

The poem thus enacts what we might call an epistemic resistance. The Abiku resists translation into human symbolic systems. It subverts the archival impulse by insisting that the true record of its being is written in the ephemeral (dew, oil sucked from lamps), the viscous (yolk), and the cyclical (the repeated time). Its final act, "shaping / Mounds from the yolk" (lines 31-32), is the ultimate epistemic statement. It takes the archetypal symbol of latent, unified life (the yolk) and transforms it into a sign of multiple, barren deaths (mounds). It creates an archive of negation, a monument to anti-fruition, using the very substance of potential. This is knowledge as anti-teleology.

In a postcolonial context, this epistemic struggle is deeply political. The colonial and early nationalist projects were, in part, massive epistemic undertakings: to rename, remap, re-categorise, and archive the colonized world according to European rationalist and administrative logics. Soyinka's "Abiku", along with the Ogun of his other works, represents an assertion of an indigenous, non-linear, metaphysically complex epistemology that resists this flattening. The haunted landscape is the true archive of history, trauma, and spirit, one that cannot be catalogued in a colonial museum or a nationalist textbook. The poem, therefore, is more than a story of a spirit-child; it is a meta-commentary on the limits of certain forms of knowing and a testament to the persistent, riddling presence of alternative knowledge systems, inscribed in the very flesh of the land and in the cyclical returns of that which refuses to be explained away. The Abiku is not solved; it is encountered, and in that encounter, the foundational structures of human understanding are profoundly destabilised.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has argued that Wole Soyinka's "Abiku" constitutes a profound and cohesive meditation on the postcolonial condition, articulated through a unique synthesis of Yoruba cosmology and ecological consciousness. Through the application of a tripartite theoretical framework, weaving together Soyinkan mythopoetics, the theory of structural violence, and necropolitical theory, we have traced the contours of what can be termed a Soyinkan ontology of crisis. This is a worldview in which identity, history, and political destiny are not linear progressions but are instead governed by a foundational cycle of sterile recurrence, a metaphysical principle mirrored in the natural order.

The analysis reveals "Abiku" as the representation of a pathological archetype: The Ogunian dialectic in a state of complete arrest. The poem presents the cycle not as a spiral towards renewal but as a closed loop of traumatic recurrence. It stands as a powerful allegory for the necropolitical stasis of the postcolony, where the promise of rebirth is perpetually thwarted by a spectral past and a self-consuming political logic. The spirit's refusal of integration and its alliance with a sentient, liminal landscape model a condition of being where the potential for transformative, creative destruction is supplanted by the inevitability of dissolution and return.

Ultimately, Soyinka's poetic project does not offer a singular, prescriptive resolution to the dilemmas of postcolonial becoming. Instead, it maps a metaphysical and political terrain with stark precision. The defiant stasis of the Abiku encapsulates a tragic pole of possibility: the reality of entrapment. The enduring significance of the poem lies in its insistence that the fate of the polity is inextricably linked to its relationship with these deeper, recursive rhythms of being. To be in the Soyinkan world is to confront the possibility of a broken dialectic, where the cycle is one not of regenerative transformation, but of sterile, self-cannibalizing return. In framing this condition with such mythic power and allegorical precision, Soyinka ensures that "Abiku" remains an indispensable, unsettling, and vital diagnostic in postcolonial thought.

[1]Abiku in "Yoruba ontology of reincarnation, myths and superstition…(is) a child who moves between the world of the living and the dead, dying and returning, never fully here or there." (Dauda and Falola, 2022:103-184)

[2]J.P. Clark-Bekederemo likewise engages the Abiku motif in his poem "Abiku", which addresses the spirit-child phenomenon; however, the poets' respective preoccupations diverge markedly. Whereas Soyinka's poem adopts a first-person Abiku voice that asserts a liminal, self-aggrandising indestructibility, Clark's poem is articulated through a third-person persona whose stance is one of supplication, imploring the Abiku to exercise empathy toward those subjected to the cyclical violence of its reincarnatory agency.

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Appendix 1: The poem, "Abiku" by Wole Soyinka

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

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

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.

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

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;

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

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