



Nature and mystical beliefs in Biakolo's *Inotan and the River Goddess* of and Sanusi's *La vie d'un enfant mystérieux*

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ABSTRACT

African literary works, since their inception with the advent of colonialism, have explored diverse realities, ranging from critiques of colonial legacies to dictatorship, women's subjugation and empowerment, civil unrest on the African continent, migration, as well as the importance of nature in human day-to-day living. Environmental discourse in African literature, expressed in both English and French, has primarily focused on the aesthetics of nature and human nefarious activities that pose a danger to both nature and human existence, with little attention given to spirituality and mysticism. Using the comparative model as a method and magical realism as a framework, this research seeks to demonstrate that indigenous mystical beliefs are intricately tied to the natural environment. Specifically, water bodies (rivers) and trees are identified as key mystical habitats while shedding light on the multifaceted nature of African mystical beliefs and their profound connection to the environment. The research argues that nature transcends mere aesthetics, serving as a complex and enigmatic realm accessible only to those initiated into its ontological landscapes, as it reveals a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between culture, spirituality, and the environment in African literature. It also highlights the significance of acknowledging the diversity of mystical beliefs shaped by distinct ecological landscapes, with potential implications for environmental discourse.

Keywords: Nature, Mystical beliefs, Environment, Cosmology, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Belief in the supernatural is not a novel concept in African prose fiction, whether expressed in French or English. Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953), criticised by lots of African critics as being too eurocentric, captures the totem of the serpent and the connection to water spirits. Contemporary writers like Alain Mabanckou in *Demain j'aurai vingt ans* (2010) also maintained African beliefs and connections to powers beyond the ordinary, as he traced the connection of a man's life to a double in the form of an animal and sometimes a tree. The same set of beliefs is also reiterated in works like *le mémoire de porc épique* (2006). Otegbale and Ogueri-Obaro (2024) while tracing written literary works in the Anglophone block, such as Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2005), Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, emphasized that all intermarried reality, and the fictional with elements of magical realism, while referring to powers beyond the physical realm of human existence.

Belief in Mammy Water as contained in Biakolo's *Inotna and the River Goddess* (1992) and the concept of Abiku/Emere in Sanusi's *La Vie d'un Enfant Mystérieux* are not new in African scholarship, especially in religious scholarly work. In Sanusi's text, the concept of Abiku (emere) in Yoruba cosmology is represented in *La vie d'un enfant mystérieux*. Kuponu & Talabi (2021) submit concerning the above that Abiku, which translates to "Die Again," constitutes a metaphysical aspect of the cycle of rebirth, capturing the concept of recurrent life and death within the same maternal lineage. Ilechukwu (2007:239) maintained similar position earlier, equating Abiku to Ogbanje in Igbo cosmology and opining that "Ogbanje/abiku refers to people who are believed to cycle rapidly and repeatedly through birth and death". This practice is intrinsically linked to the belief in water deities in Africa, worshipped by the Igbe cult group in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Chuks (2019) submits that "African water divinities can be found in the ritual production of Mami Water through the ritual and spiritual endeavours of the Igbe cult".

The concept of Mammy water and Abiku/Emere can be linked to the concept of myth in literary studies. Myths in literary works provide foundational narratives, archetypes, and themes that writers adapt to create complex and meaningful works often used to explore cultural, psychological, and philosophical dimensions, reflecting contemporary issues and offering new interpretations (Righter, 2024). Yoruba and Urhobo, mythologies capture the aforementioned captivating features. The Urhobo, an ethnic group primarily inhabiting Delta State, and the Yoruba, predominantly located in southwestern Nigeria, share traditional

practices emphasizing family, community, and agriculture (Udo, 2023). Traditional religious beliefs among the Urhobo and Yoruba involve the worship of deities and ancestors, though specific practices differ (Igboin, 2019). Festivals celebrating deities, harvests, and historical events are elaborate and communal, highlighting the rich cultural heritage.

In the context of mythology, both the mammy water and the abiku/emere embody themes of death, the spirit world, and liminality (Okwuosa et al., 2021; Chuks & Makwudo, 2020). While distinct, they share a connection explored in the field of mythical studies. Whitaker (2020) contends that ‘Mammy Water’ referred to as ‘water mamas’, a beautiful yet dangerous river spirit, is associated with both wealth and the potential theft of souls, particularly children. Abiku are spirit-children destined for early deaths, returning repeatedly to the same parents. The danger of Mammy Water becomes a potent symbol of what might happen if Abiku are not appeased through rituals, highlighting anxieties around childhood mortality. These figures together reveal the Urhobo and Yoruba belief systems where the spirit world and physical world are intertwined, with water acting as a potential gateway. Studying them offers a window into cultural rituals aimed at appeasing anxieties and navigating the uncertainties of life and death as exemplified in the selected texts by the two Nigerian actors from the diverse geographical territories in Nigeria

Yoruba myths often attribute the creation of the world to Olorun, the supreme god, while Urhobo myths describe the world as emerging from primordial chaos. Ancestral spirits play significant roles in both traditions, acting as intermediaries between the living and the divine. Anyanwu (2023) explains that trickster figures like the Yoruba god Eshu and similar Urhobo characters represent chaos and challenge societal norms. Despite these similarities, there are distinct sub-traditions within each culture. Akande et al. (2022) submit that Yoruba mythology is complex, featuring a pantheon of gods with specialised domains and creation stories often centred around Ile-Ife. In Yoruba mythology, the Oyo Empire emphasizes Sango, the god of thunder, while the Ifa religion reveres Orunmila, the god of wisdom. On the contrary, Igboin (2024) reveals that the Urhobo myths are more localised, emphasising creator gods from the natural world and specific ancestral veneration practices. The Abraka sub-tradition focuses on their founding ancestor, while the Ewreni sub-tradition highlights their connection to the forest.

African mystical beliefs do not exist in isolation, but are often tied to specific physical objects made from natural elements. Ogueri-Obaro (2023), investigating man’s relationship with the

environment from an eco-critical point of departure, emphasised the role of trees in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, translated as *L'autre moitié du soleil*, and Menémbo's *Le roi de Kahe*. She opines that nature plays an aesthetic role in beautifying the environment while also serving as a source of medicine, food, shelter, and protection against other elements of nature like the scorching sun. Ekhuemelo et al. (2016) expanded the assertion of Ogueri-Obaro further by stating that forested catchments supply a large proportion of all water used for domestic, agricultural, and industrial needs. Beyond these representations, the identified writes in this study stretched the scope on nature reflection in the African continent with the projection of the concept of mammy water (river goddess) and abiku/emere in Urhobo and Yoruba cosmology respectively. Thus, the position of this paper is to show that whereas nature serves so many functions for man physically, there is a belief from one geographical location to another, depending on the prevalent natural habitat, on the role nature plays as far as mysticism is concerned. This is portrayed in Biakolo's *Inotant and the River Goddess* and Sanusi's *La vie d'un enfant mystérieux* analysed in this study.

METHODOLOGY

A comparative model for literary analysis is adopted in this study as a methodology with magical realism in the analysis of the chosen texts for meaning recovery. The comparative technique, which was created in Russian literary criticism at the end of the 20th century, is one of the contemporary comparative study methodologies (Amineva, 2018). Comparative study in literary analysis ensures richer understanding, contextualization, highlighting patterns and trends, and exploring universal themes, diversity, and inclusivity in literary works while fostering critical thinking for readers and critics. Khabibullina et al. (2019) reiterate in their study that "the comparative study of works of Russian and foreign classics among bi- and multilingual Tatar students makes it possible to enrich their cultural horizons and cultivate a tolerant attitude towards the world of the "foreigner" in them". Thus, a deeper exploration of the cultural, historical, and social contexts that shape these texts is encouraged in the comparative study of literature as a means of comprehending ethnocultural identity. This is obtainable in the selected texts chosen for the study.

Magical realism in the African context seeks to explore and celebrate the mystical and spiritual aspects of African culture while simultaneously addressing contemporary issues. Kochupurackal (2021) submits that magical realism is "a way to uncover the mystery hidden in ordinary objects and everyday reality" while establishing that the term 'magical realism'

was first used by Franz Roh, the German historian, photographer, and artist. In literary works, magical realism could give readers a surreal experience without straying outside the realm of reality or by referencing the myths and beliefs of certain ethno-cultural groups that effortlessly mix rational and magical components while ensuring there are no contradictions between these features. The selected texts in this study align with the second categorization of works on magical realism. The texts, like most African texts with magical realism, contain elements of cultural syncretism (a blend of African indigenous beliefs and the western influence of Christianity) and magical elements with mystical creatures and rituals presented as interwoven with the characters' lives.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The texts, *Inotan and the River Goddess* of Biakolo and Sanusi's *La vie d'un enfant mystérieux*, share similar elements of magical realism such as blurred boundaries, common magic, acknowledgment, symbolic meaning, lack of explanation, cultural and folklore references, timelessness, narrative voice, several realities, ambiguity, and themes of identity and belonging. The various mystical and magical realist elements in the texts are joined in the production of single narratives that the reader experiences as well as their overall impact on the characters' lives. These are the instruments the writer uses to convey nuanced and original messages about complex ideas, emotions, and cultural contexts.

One key manifestation of magical realism in the selected novels is the use of blurred boundaries. In Biakolo's *Inotan and the River Goddess*, the reader is introduced to the mystical environment of a kingdom underneath the water (marine kingdom) through the implementation of blurred vision in the narrator's presentation of the hero's journey to an unknown environment not visible to the average man, explaining that:

A magnetic force was drawing him to the bottom of the water. He felt an irresistible tug at his feet, he wanted to raise an alarm. But he could not find his voice. It was like a nightmare...Inotan's eyes opened to a beautiful spectacle. Twelve pretty maidens were dancing around him. He could see only their breast upwards. (p.39)

Like most mystical presentations, the use of blurred vision in the above brings to life the magical appearance of a location previously unknown to the character. The mysterious environment is captured with references to linguistic lexicons such as "mysterious palace", and pretty maidens," with the expression "only their breasts upward" used in describing the

creatures. The detailed description of the narrator in the text at this juncture underscores the fact that there are different types of creatures in the cosmos, with similar features in the upper region of water beings and humans, in line with the writer's description. This same presentation in the text is used in detailing the leaders of the new habitat discovered by the little hero, Inotan, thus:

The River Goddess was the most dazzling beauty Inotan had ever set his eyes on. From slightly below the waist to her hair, she was the perfect Image of splendid femininity. Her hair was wavy and pitch black. She had natural eyelashes that could render a eunuch into a Casanova. Her neck was covered fully by a diamond necklace. Her breasts were firm, steady and aggressive. Her arms were supple and tender. She wore golden bangles on her wrists. She also had on her breasts a transparent silk material shiny and resembling a bra. From her chest to the navel was uncovered and alluring. A sparkling gold loincloth veiled her from the navel to the thighs. The rest of her figure downwards was a silver fin-coated fish. (p.50)

The presentation of the river goddess in the above picture, along with the other water bodies captured earlier, underscores the mysteriousness of the creatures. Like the other water bodies, the river goddess is presented as a mystical creature that shares some physical features with humans and those of a fish. The unexplainable nature of these creatures' existence is relayed in the text at this juncture as the writer attempts to reveal the forgotten reality of divergent creatures in the cosmos. The physical beauty of the creature with exaggerated details, as well as the hybrid nature decked out with accessories, all underscore magical realism.

The emergence of human and aquatic characteristics blurs the line between reality and fantasy in the presentation of the creature as a hybrid. The transformation of her lower body into a "silver fin-coated fish" This transformation is a fantastical departure from reality and is a hallmark of magical realism, where the ordinary coexists with the extraordinary in a matter-of-fact way. Accessories like a diamond necklace, golden bangles, and a transparent silk material on her breasts that resembles a bra, as presented in their luxurious manner, contribute to the sense of magic and enchantment surrounding her character. References to the character's natural eyelashes having the power to make an eunuch into a Casanova underscore an exaggeration that is out of reality. In like manner, emphasis on the character's extraordinary beauty is a characteristic of magical realism, as it presents something fantastical within a seemingly realistic setting.

In Sanusi's *LVEM*, blurred boundaries are heavily used in depicting the involvement of spiritual beings and their interaction in the day-to-day life and activities of the narrator.

Expressions like "les enfants mystérieux ne m'abandonnèrent pas totalement et vinrent travailler dans les champs de mon père" (The spirit children did not entirely abandon me but came to work in my parents farms) p.67. This projects the activities of ethereal beings in the realisation of farm work and possible bumper harvests. It foregrounds that there exists a partnership between humans and ethereal beings in their daily work.

Apart from engaging in human activities in a collaborative manner, Sanusi's presentation of the existence of spirit in reference to the natural environment is relayed through blurred boundaries. Clauses like "ce palais se trouvait à l'intérieur de l'arbre où jem'étais mis à me reposer après eêtre las de marcher" (The palace was inside the tree where I had been resting after I got tired of walking) p.87 suggest that the tree, known to be a useful element of nature that helps with wind break and prevent desert encroachment among other functions like furniture making, is a mystical place, a concept almost impossible to understand and relate to by an average man. This position of the writer is further captured as the narrator relates the explanation given by one of the characters describing this mystical environment, thus: "Le liquid rouge que nous t'avons donné à boire était du sang. Tout ce que tu vois rouge dans mon palais est fait du sang" (the red liquid that we gave you to drink was blood. Everything that you see red in my palace are made with blood) p.102. From these accounts, the palace within the tree serves as a portal to a reality where the lines between the ordinary and extraordinary are permeable, the bizarre and the beautiful coexist, and revelations are met with wonder rather than fear, inviting us to explore the depths of our own perceptions and beliefs.

Beyond the blurred boundaries employed by both writers in investigating and projecting a surreal aspect of nature that most writers have not delved into, the concept of acceptance is also vehemently used in the texts. The use of acceptance provides readers with a detailed insight into the belief systems in the two divergent geographical locations that constitute the milieu of the texts and the origins of the writers.

In *Sanusi's' La vie d'un enfant mystérieux*, natural elements like trees are accepted as magical inhabitants. This is captured in the reflected beliefs of the people in the text, as recorded in the excerpt below.

La cérémonie de baptême se tint le septième jour qui suivit ma naissance sous le géant arbre iroko...Toutefois abattre le géant arbre sans accomplir certains rites pour neutraliser les esprits à l'intérieur de l'arbre aurait eu de graves

répercussions sur quiconque essayait de le faire...L'iroko était en fait la demeure des enfants *abami eda*, c'est-à-dire des enfants mystérieux. (Pp.23-25)

my naming ceremony was held on the seventh day after my birth under the giant Iroko tree...However, cutting the giant iroko without performing some rituals to neutralize the spirit inside the tree would have serious repercussions on whoever attempted to do so...The iroko tree was actually the abode of *abami eda's* children, that is the spirit children. *The Spirit Child*, p.10

In the above, rituals such as naming ceremonies have significant importance, nature is sentient and inhabited by spirits, and the lines between the ordinary and the extraordinary are blurred. Exposing the tree's significance as the dwelling of spirit children known as *abami eda's* offspring, the belief in the consequences of cutting down the tree without proper rites foregrounds the acceptance by the people of the existence of such spirits and the significance accorded them in the interconnected relationship between man and spirits. The submission of the writer therefore emphasises the fact that nature is a mystical environment on its own, contrary to the perception of man, and man must coexist with nature because of its impact on his day-to-day activities.

Another area of belief that can be characterised as a magical reality in the work of Sanusi is the concept of Abiku and Emere in Yoruba cosmology. A typical example is related in the group of sentences

Les esprits appelés emere viennent dans cette vie en promettant à leur groupe ce qu'ils feront dans la vie comme une alliance de leur loyauté et de leur engagement envers ce groupe. Les femmes emere sont généralement reconnues pour le fait de mourir le jour de leur mariage ; d'autres sont reconnues pour le fait de rester à jamais stériles dans le monde réel mais sont plutôt fécondes dans le monde mystérieux. (p.19)

The spirits called Emere come to this life with a promise to their group on what they would do in life, as a covenant of their loyalty and dedication to their group. Emere women are usually known to die on the day they get married; others are known never to have children in the real world, but have them in their mysterious world instead. *The Spirit Child*, p.7

From the presentation of the narrator in the excerpt above, there is an accepted belief in Emeres, who exist in close connection with humans. The lives of such individuals are intricately bound by a set of mystical promises and an otherworldly existence. Such a covenant symbolises their unwavering loyalty and dedication to their mystical community, transcending the boundaries of the mundane and supernatural. Also, such women are believed to be destined to pass away on the day of their marriage or remain childless on earth while bearing children in the mystical world. This presentation blurs the lines between reality and

mysticism by underscoring the fact that a person's life is not only influenced by his personal choices but also by extraterrestrial agreements and destinies. Thus, the writer foregrounds before the reader, in a bit of a fictional way, the need to embrace in reality a world where the mystical intricacies of life are interwoven with the everyday experiences of those who dwell in this realm.

Unlike the belief in spirit beings living inside trees in Sanusi's text, Biakolo's *Biakolo's Inotan and the River Goddess* address another element of nature considered mystical by the locals in the riverine environment in the milieu of the text. Mysticism in this context underscores the belief in the water spirit and the magical event in the ethereal habitat captured in the text. expressions like "Ganagana is near the home of a powerful Mammy Water" (p.7) while describing the milieu of the text; "Mammy Water will come and carry you if you remain a moment more in the water" (p.23) used by parents to scare children who refuse to stop swimming in the river; and "Mammy Water has claimed another victim!" (p.30) employed by sympathisers after the disappearance of the hero, all foreground the general belief in an aquatic being referred to as "Mammy Water" throughout the text. Thus, the river, a natural ecological environment, is depicted as a mystical place dangerous to humans, who have used it to meet their various needs throughout history.

The mystical nature of the ecological environment in the text is also foregrounded by the novelist as he tries to present in clear terms the realities of a world unknown to the average man, with respect to how time works, the daily realities of the habitat, and the existence of magical events. Time as a factor in man's day-to-day life is presented as a frozen object in the text Biakolo. The narrator brings home this reality as he underlines his encounters during his different quests to get ingredients for the portion of the ethereal being, as relayed in the excerpt below.

After luring the gorilla out of the city and far away from anybody's gaze, Inotan rested for a few minutes in his visible form. The gorilla growled at him. He quickly touched the blue belt. He waved the feather vigorously before the gorilla. The beast quieted down. Inotan rubbed the magic powder on himself and on the gorilla. They both became invisible. He touched the blue belt and pressed it against the gorilla's hand. At the same time, he wished himself and the gorilla at the Ganagana River. They were whisked there through the air in a second. (p.119)

The above is a secluded area far from the city and any onlookers, where Inotan interacts with a gorilla using magical items to become invisible and transport them both to the Ganagana

River weaving together the magical and the mundane. Inotan's supernatural power to communicate and alter the physical world is smoothly weaved into the story. We see a moment of relaxation and connection between the two as he lures the gorilla away from the city, despite the fact that they speak different languages. The use of a blue belt, a feather, and magic powder represents Inotan's esoteric instruments, creating a feeling of wonder and enchantment. When Inotan and the gorilla become invisible and are transported to the Ganagana River with a simple touch of the belt, it exemplifies the magical realist narrative's ability to effortlessly blur the boundaries between reality and the supernatural, where extraordinary feats are treated as a natural extension of the world they inhabit, inviting readers to suspend disbelief and engage with a reality where the mystical coexists with the everyday in a harmonious, albeit uneasy, coexistence. Time in the above context is also regarded as frozen, as both the character and the animal arrive at their destinations in a second.

CONCLUSION

This study has looked at the distinct portrayals of African magical realism in Sanusi's *'La vie d'un Enfant mystérieux'* and Biakolo's *'Inotan and the River Goddess.'* In their unique ways, both authors reveal the spiritual and cultural elements of their particular ecosystems, relying on ecology and local beliefs. Sanusi emphasises the importance of woods and trees as spiritual dwelling places, whereas Biakolo demonstrates the varied character of water bodies, which house not only ethereal creatures but also a sophisticated civilization of aquatic species. These discoveries highlight the complexity and diversity of African magical realism, shining light on the complex interactions that exist between humans, spirits, and the natural world. Mystic beliefs in Africa are inextricably tied to the natural surroundings of many geographical areas, reflecting the distinct cultural tapestries of each place in conjunction with the study's findings. Furthermore, the research emphasises the significance of recognising and honouring these varied cultural beliefs and myths, which contribute to the multidimensional nature of African literature and cultural studies. There is a ton of opportunity for more research in this area as we move to the future. Future studies might dive more into the distinct regional variances in African magical realism, look at how storytelling is affected by ecological issues, or investigate how these ideas are changing in modern African literature. In conclusion, Sanusi and Biakolo's presentations encourage us to acknowledge that nature is a dynamic stage where living things like humans, spirits, and

ethereal entities cohabit. The complex interactions between African cultures and the environment are reflected in this cohabitation.

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