

SUPERNATURAL MANIFESTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY: A
STUDY OF CHIDUBEM IWEKA'S *THE ANCIENT CURSE*

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Abstract

The supreme sin of the west is the devaluation of African culture and the alienation of the educated blacks from their native traditions and originality, thereby breeding people who are neither black nor white. The study is weaved around Chidubem Iweka's riveting but grotesque novel, *The Ancient Curse* which is a tragic tale of extraordinary forces. It explored the manifestations of evil inherent in some families, where the forbearers, contracted for protective purposes, come to haunt the living, who have no idea of the existence of such powers. This study explored the cultural values, traditions, beliefs, and world views of the people within the settings of the work. The novelist portrayed the beauty of the rich African cultural heritage and the influence of supernatural forces in human lives. The data for this study is from both primary and secondary sources with the novel being the primary source, while library texts, journals and internet were the secondary sources. The research exposed the readers to the various values, norms, heritages and beliefs that are uniquely African, and the implications of these practices which form the crux of the study. It was discovered that Africans, indeed Nigerians have a rich cultural heritage they should be proud of, despite the negative aspects. Archetypal criticism is the theoretical framework this study was anchored on.

Keywords: Supernatural, Manifestations, Contemporary, African Society, Beliefs

Introduction

Literature is a mirror which reflects man's actual life in any society where he is found. It also borrows from history and relies on everyday events. Literature, like all other art forms, draws on human experiences and tries to reflect the same and communicate it to man in order, and in artistic form. It can also imply an artistic use of words for the sake of art alone. According to Asika Ikechukwu,

Literature in the commonest term is the reflection of man and his society. It is a mirror through it which man as a social being could be looked upon and his society examined. It looks at human behavior and attitudes to life which it often extols, criticizes, ridicules, and mocks in order to correct and build a more orderly and harmonious society. Literature teaches and entertains. It tells us who we are, where we are and where we ought to be (2).

Literature starts its journey of creation from the society and ends its journey in the society. It does not exist in the world of abstraction. The restoration of Africa culture and unique way of life has become a thing of serious concern to many writers and scholars. David Ker in his book *Literature and Society in Africa* solemnly opines that:

We must restore our Literature to the focal position it ought to occupy in our cultural awareness since our Literature is the fullest record in which we have of our aspirations, our analysis of our mistakes, our problems and the way we have faced them. This very fact should give to our literature, a primly which can be shared than any other. As the first step in demonstrating the vital relevance of our literature to our contemporary problems, it is necessary to point out that the moralistic basis of our culture is everywhere, proclaimed by our literature (32).

Scholars like Achebe's whole intention was to prove that in the African societies, there existed people who had a culture before the coming of the white man. In one of his essays, *The Novelist as a Teacher* as cited in NgoziChuma-Udeh's *Trends and Issues in Nigeria Literature*, he wrote without mincing words that:

Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period, and it is that they must regain now. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them what happened to them, what they lost. There is an Igbo saying that a man who cannot tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After all, the writers' duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality; it is to explore the depth of the human condition (43).

The intrusion of colonization marked a disruption of African's traditional values and customs, it could be recalled that before the white men arrived the shores of the African continent, the European writers regarded Africa as a dark continent, peopled by savage and primitive heathens who indulged in all sorts of crimes, ranging from cannibalism, idolatry, fetishism to savagery and brigand. Leo Africana's writing in this vein in the sixteenth century in work, *The History and Description of Africa* commented that; "The negroes lead a beastly kind of life being utterly destitute of the use of reason of dexterity, of wit and all arts. Yea, they so behave themselves, as if they had continually lived in a forest among wild beasts". (21)

Eko Ebele's *The Man and His Work*, has this to say about the concept of supernaturalism:

Girding the village as a tight skirt are the forests, the swamps, the narrow paths leading to neighboring villages; and beyond these, the unknown, the mysterious. That shroud of mystery hides from view, the numerous gods, spirits, ancestors and the unborn. To interpret this other world, there are powerful traditional intermediaries. The priests and the dibias, whose air of spiritual assurance and whose observance of many taboos set them apart, surrounded by a cloud of mystery (Eko 33).

Flowing from the above, it is very clear, that God Almighty is the highest and Supreme Being to every other gods, goddesses, spirits, ghosts, ancestral powers, the priests, priestesses, the Dibias etc. no matter how powerful these gods claim they are; they are however given natural attributes.

For instance, in John, Dewey's *Naturalism*, there is a dualism: supernatural and the natural. According to Dewey, he believes that the supernatural is from above and therefore, there is no changes ascribed to it, and this has to do with the Almighty God, while the natural deals with all human beings on planet earth, including the gods, and the spirit being which the unseen forces are. To Dewey, everything is part of nature; there is no permanence in the world of nature, no fixity. He believes that change is the only thing that is absolutely universal.

Flowing from the above, one can say that the supernatural forces feature prominently in the African societies, where great respect is been accorded to these superhuman agents. And it is also interesting to say that the supernatural is perhaps the broadest classification of religious practices, encompassing any belief system dealing with supernatural forces. It asserts the existence of forces beyond human comprehension that frequently interfere, for better or worse, in human affairs. Most simply, the laws of nature do not bind the supernatural. These forces are considered impersonal because they are thought to come and go as they deem fit, and can inhabit human and non-human objects alike all over the world. In this instance, the novel by Chidubem Iweka seems to explore the influences and manifestations of the beliefs in the supernatural forces in the African environment.

Conceptual Review

Supernatural: *The Chambers Papers Back Dictionary*, also defined supernaturalism as not happening in the ordinary course of nature, miraculous. It is seen as the soul, a being without a body, a ghost, an evil spirit, it is the belief that living people can communicate with souls of dead people (512). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines supernatural as of or relating to existence outside the natural world, it is attributed to a power that seems to violate or go beyond natural forces or relating to a deity, it is relating to the immediate exercise of divine power; miraculous, or relating to the miraculous.

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica Vol. 11*, supernaturalism is defined as a belief in another worldly realm or reality that, in one way or another is commonly associated with all forms of religion. It is also seen as an evidence of neither the idea of nature nor the experience of a purely

natural realm which is found among primitive people, who inhabit a wonderful world, charged with the sacred power (or mana), spirits and deities (400).

Culture: *Culture* is a way of life of a group of people-the behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Africanism: *Africanisms* refer to characteristics of African culture that can be traced through societal practices and institutions of the African diaspora.

Tradition: *Tradition* is a belief or behaviour (folk custom) passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past.

Theoretical Framework

Archetypal Theory is adopted in this study. This is derived from the Swiss Psychologist Carl Jung's Theory of the Collective Unconscious. According to Northrop Frye:

Archetypal criticism is a literary approach that identifies those mystic elements that give a literary work deeper meaning. Archetypal features help in understanding the text and in defining its form and function. These features also demonstrate that the meaning of a text does not reside only on the page nor can it be interpreted only as an independent entity (112).

Jung's theory of the collective unconscious provides the impetus for exploring archetypes represented in literary works. As Echezona Ifejirika says:

In literature, an archetype is a typical character, an action or a situation that seems to represent such universal patterns of human nature. They are unknowable basic forms personified or concretised in recurring images, symbols or patterns which may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognisable character types such as the tricksters (62).

Archetypal critics search for intellectual enlightenment or spiritual inspiration in a work of literature. A substantial dosage of ancient myths, legends, ritual and the presence of the gods and goddesses, ghost, spirits, ancients, powers, forces, deities, ancestral powers and references to primordial images and character types is being referred to. A practical reading of Chidubem Iweka's *The Ancient Curse*, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Great Ponds*, Odili Ujubuonu's *Pregnancy of the Gods*, *Pride of the Spider Clan* and *Treasure in the Wind*, Femi Osofisan's *The Women of Owu*, are critical examples of the archetypal literary criticism.

In a nutshell, Ifejirika stresses that, the archetypal critics' belief in the supernatural powers such as the heavenly ascents, the powers of dreams, the spirit that walks in the midst of men, singing and lamenting showing their unhappiness and the death and rebirth, that is reincarnation stories in the human world. Archetypal criticism determines both the form and the function of the text and adds greater depth and understanding to literary works, hence these three novels are chosen for the study, because they cover substantially the various archetypal beliefs as they relate to the supernatural elements or supernaturalism in the African world.

Review of Related Scholarship

Chidubem Iweka's *The Ancient Curse* has not undergone much reviews, the novel dwells on supernatural manifestations and overwhelming powers of the gods in the lives of Africans. The supernatural is established by those forms of religion that post a final or ultimate coincidence between the natural and the supernatural or the sacred and the profane. Africans have much belief in the supernatural, they are superstitious and their beliefs in their ancestral powers, their gods, goddess, spirits, magic powers and their religious beliefs influence human actions which are guided and directed by forces. The sociologists Onigu Oite and William Ogionwo recognized that "the concept of the supernatural is basic and crucial in a definition of religion. In their view, the relationship between man and the supernatural is not haphazard; it is institutionalized" (153).

In the olden days as Taiwo stated, mystical forces conditioned African religious beliefs. Nothing was done without consulting the oracles, the gods or their deities or at least the Dibias, the priests or the priestesses who are made to serve their gods and ancestors. To exalt the wonder of Africa,

there is indeed something mystical and mythical in the African ancestral religion. This religion is not only a religion of preaching, imploring and worshipping the gods, it is a religion in which the gods participate in the day to day life of the people. They are present and any time they are needed, and they are actors in the taking of the clan's decisions, through their shrines and their priests. For that, Amadi said in *The Great Ponds*, "there was much to be said for having a god's shrine in a village. It made the god seem less remote. Their priests worked among the people expounding its mysteries and letting people know the right time for the various sacrifices" (130).

In African traditional belief system, God is the explanation of all things. The world was created by Him. The Africans therefore believed that the environment is knitted to the presence of God. As John Mbiti puts it:

God is the explanation of man's origin and sustenance; it is as if God exists for the sake of man, God's agents are charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order in the society. Thus, both physical and supernatural forces are always present in the administration of the society (199).

One can say that the supernatural forces feature prominently in the African societies, where great respect is been accorded to these superhuman agents. And it is also interesting to say that the supernatural is perhaps the broadest classification of religious practices, encompassing any belief system dealing with supernatural forces. It asserts the existence of forces beyond human comprehension that frequently interfere, for better or worse, in human affairs. Most simply, the laws of nature do not bind the supernatural. These forces are considered impersonal because they are thought to come and go as they see fit, and can inhabit human and non-human objects alike all over the world. In this context, *The Ancient Curse* explores the veracity of influences of the beliefs in supernatural manifestations in the African environment.

Supernatural Manifestations in Chidubem Iweka's *The Ancient Curse*

Chidubem Iweka's *The Ancient Curse* addresses the issue of the supernatural forces and manifestations, the powers of the ancient deity (gods) through the life and family of Obi Emeka Aniameka, who suffers series of losses in his family, all of them tragically, his father falls from a

palm tree, his brother dies in an auto crash and his wife died giving birth to their second child. Now his first child and only daughter is scheduled to die next.

This was made known to Obi after inlaw Mr. Abodi consulted an oracle and brings the mysterious revelation to Obi's notice, pointing out that he so much believed that there was an ancient evil force in Obi's family. He cautioned his daughter but she didn't listen to him, which lead to her untimely death. Mr. Abodi stung by his daughter's unwarranted death, he awakes Obi to the reality of the ancient powers behind his family tragedies;

The ancient evil that lives in your family, that diabolical, fiendish ghoul that is killing you off one by one or have you forgotten that your own mother died just this same way as she was giving birth to her last born, Chika? And next was your elder sister, Ekwutosi, she had been delivered of her twins safely in the hospital; no complications. But a few days later, she started bleeding and apparently bled to death in her sleep (19).

Mr. Abodi was able to make Obi see clearly the ancient force which was about to completely wipe out his entire lineage hence, Mr. Abodi said out of annoyance; "After I had spent my hard earned money on the oracle and revealed to you that the ancient force in your family was about to destroy you all" (19). However, this made Obi to travel far with his friend Charles to the temple of Eze-Eze Vii, a man vast in knowledge and in powers of exorcism. But this was after narrowly escaping being killed in a road accident on his way. His daughter's appointed day of death being averted only because of the high spiritual force guiding Grace, a genuine woman of God she rescues Obi's daughter Chioma from being overrun by a moving truck.

Obi's issue was more complicated when he discovered from Eze-Eze, that his true identity was to serve the dreadful deity known as Ogidi. Eze-Eze revealed to Obi how Ogidi the deadly deity came into their family many years ago as a small deity and how Obi was chosen after several divinations to serve it, thus:

Ogidi came into your family as a small deity worshipped by a small group of your ancestors; the "Imenne" and you, Obi were chosen by the deity after series of divinations, to serve as custodian of the shrine. So, you became the attendant priest who offered libation

and sacrifice on behalf of worshippers. Two men and women were bound in chains and sacrificed at the shrine of Ogidi to harness the force (53).

It was further revealed that Ogidi grew in power and so did its demand now for goats and rams and even for cows, and it was equally told that no one complained because Ogidi was really manifesting its potent spiritual force. Ogidi made the crops in Obi's family circle do well in the farm despite the prevailing drought at that period. Male children were born into the family and there was abundant wealth, good health and spiritual protection for the members of Obi's extended family. All divination revealed that Ogidi was responsible for all these good fortunes. The novelist captures the scene thus:

Ogidi grew in power and so did its demands now for goats and rams and even for cows. No one complained because Ogidi was really manifesting its potent spiritual force. The crops in your family circle did well in the farms despite the prevailing droughts at that period... Mostly male children were born into the family and there was abundant wealth, good health and spiritual protection for the members of your extended family... All divination revealed that Ogidi was responsible for these good fortunes. Other families were envious of this force in your family, even the power manifested by you, the high priest, grew to an incredible height (54).

Then one day, Ogidi demanded the grand sacrifice, which a virgin maiden is born at the arrival of a new moon; and it is told that the message came from Obi Emeka the chosen priest of Ogidi. However, after series of divinations, the oracles confirmed that a young maiden that was sold into the family was really born at the onset of a new moon, therefore she was the right one accepted to be sacrificed to Ogidi, thus:

One day, a young maiden was sold to you after series of divination and oracles confirmed that she was really born at the onset of a new moon. This nearly caused a war when it turned out that the slave girl whom you scarified was the handmaid of a very powerful princess from a neighboring kingdom... after the matter was resolved by the two kingdoms, the town's people saw an opportunity to demand that Ogidi be brought out to be worshipped

by the entire town and you in turn, remained the high priest of Ogidi and you both served each other well (54).

Obi was transformed from the natural to the supernatural realm to see the clear picture of Ogidi the deadly deity spiritually, in order to confirm that the revelations are true, as seen:

Obi was transfixed to the spot where he stood as if rooted by a paralyzing force, gazing into Eze's dilated eyes with an undivided attention that was uncanny. Slowly, Obi was drawn, taken into the overwhelming presence of those enchanting eyes... Obi entered, as though in body and soul into a whole new dimension of sight and sound. A being... A trio of beings that looked like two huge men and an equally huge woman bound together with thick chains around their torsos stood before him. Their mottled, maggot-crusted bodies still bore the basic semblance of homo- sapiens gender now grotesque from wild and random mutations. The contact was made. Their yearning stares, shrieks and howls of excitement caused Obi to scream in horror. The link was broken, the phantom vacated for the real (52).

Eze-Eze, further declares to Obi openly that Ogidi is very angry with him for it has been three hundred and fifty years since he gave the deity its last meal; the ceremonial meal. He has a choice, either he turns to God and rebuffs Ogidi or he yields to serve Ogidi as his ancestors did a long time ago. Obi's choice to serve Ogidi places in his hands extraordinary powers that require control.

He had to go through the process of atonement, reunion appeasement and sacrifices with the deity Ogidi, so as to be able to save his only surviving daughter Chioma, Obi goes through the cleansing process at the Eze's shrine, this was done with some symbolic objects like the black powder, some herbs, hard bamboo barks, mixture of breads, brownish powder, omu, fresh palm fronds, kolanut and homemade gin popularly known as Ogogoro. Eze-Eze made some enchantments and incantations to invoke different spirits and ancestors relating to Obi. He sang and chanted, beckoning on diverse spirit forces to join him on the special ceremonial breaking of kolanut and libation he was about to perform. He called on the Udo and Ogwugwu, the Iyiakpu, Alusi-Eke and Agaba-Idoo. He called on the spirits of his ancestors and of course, Ogidi, to whose honour the

occasion was dedicated. He also called on Obi Aniemeka and his ancestors to come forth and join the ceremony (69-70).

However after completing the cleansing process, Obi and Ogidi became closely united both in the physical and in the spiritual realm. Obi could now see Ogidi clearly appearing to him in a vision, discussing and instructing Obi on what and how to do things. This is reported in these lines below:

Ogidi appeared to Obi in a vision. The unholy trio stood before him grunting and wheezing in its usual manner, but this time Obi acknowledged all thought emissions from Ogidi and responded also without uttering a word. Obi followed the instructions of Ogidi and opened his eyes (74).

Ordinarily, Obi could have not been able to see things beyond the natural level, but because of the supernatural forces or the supernaturalism embedded in this brilliant piece, the author is able to present Obi Aniemeka, with the help of Eze-Eze VII as an extraordinary person or a super-human being via the process of the cleansing which was successfully carried out by Eze-Eze vii, a man vast in knowledge and spiritual matters, Obi's choice to serve Ogidi places in his hands extraordinary powers that require control, thus, Eze-Eze warned Obi of the dangers and calamities that could befall him, for daring the powers of Ogidi. According to Eze-Eze:

You have now come into an unusual power. The question now is, can you handle it? How are you going to use or misuse it? Don't ever forget that whatever you sow, that you must reap. You cannot plant corn and harvest cocoyam. What does the old adage say? E-hen! Yes! Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely...Whatever you do, never display certain powers unceremoniously. For heaven's sake you are no two-kobo magician or dinner party entertainer, but a dibia of a very high order (76).

Despite all the warnings from *Eze-Ezeto* Obi, he still decided to misuse the supernatural powers bestowed on him by the deadly deity Ogidi. He ought to be a native doctor, but he wants to flow with the times, the modern day churches; he decided to perform as a prophet or a dibia in disguise, he takes the pains to attend a pastoral school along with his friend Charlie, who later becomes his spiritual assistant at the church which Obi tagged "the Halleluiah Ministries". After two years,

Ogidi insists on being the blood thirsty deity that it has always been, demanding for Obi's only surviving daughter as ritual object of appeasement. Charlie recognizes the danger facing Obi and he runs for help from Sister Grace and her Pastor, Pastor Okeke, whom Ogidi nearly kills before they overpower and rescue Obi from Ogidi's demonic stronghold with the help and intervention of the Almighty God. Finally, Obi and his daughter Chioma's life were restored

Furthermore, Supernaturalism is highly exhibited through the life of Chioma, Obi's only surviving daughter, who was highly possessed by Ogidi's spiritual powers. She exhibited certain supernatural acts that caused a great commotion in school. On one occasion, Chioma had used her spiritual powers to command a set of boys who specializes in bullying and extorting lunch money from other pupils to a standstill. The scene is presented thus:

As the boy with the sandwich ran off, Chioma ordered him to stop. He froze in mid-step, poised like a running character in a picture. Chioma took the sandwich from him and asked him to go away. The other boys fled, abandoning their dazed and confused partner, though the boys had agreed to keep their experience a secret for fear of punishment, it still leaked through the grapevine (83).

In another occasion, Chioma's Headmaster, who has made the session unbearable for her, by punishing her often for the little misunderstanding they had in his office, was sent to a psychiatrist by mere word of mouth. Chioma sneaked up behind the headmaster who stood chalk-in-hand facing the blackboard and muttered to his hearing:

Headmaster, Chioma called. Yes, he answered and turned around. Their eyes met and locked in a moment of spiritual encounter. What the H.M saw in those little, brown eyes awed and enchanted him. Mr. Okoye, you must continue, teaching till the cock crows in the morning "Yes" the H.M answered distantly. I must continue teaching. Chioma packed her school bag and left (84).

Overall, the supernatural forces of Ogidi's powers controlling Chioma, made her to miraculously apprehend a gang of four notorious armed robbers who almost killed Mr. Folarin Anubi at a gun-point. A young voice rang out from the midst of the crowded pupil "stop". Mokassa and his boys

looked behind them and saw Chioma Aniemeka standing a few meters away. A giddy sensation slowly enveloped them giving all three a feeling of mental preoccupation. You boys have been very naughty, scaring this nice man like that; Chioma admonished them. 'You!' she pointed at Ofili who was already carrying the sack, "give the man back his sack, and throw those guns away! All of you." Ofili returned the sack to Folarin and all three bandits looked at Chioma searchingly then threw their guns across the field...Chioma beckoned on him and asked him to sit down with the others on the ground. He obeyed without question. So sat all four bandits on the grass, while Chioma scolded and admonished them: "And don't anyone of you get up until the policemen get here," Chioma told the robbers (87).

In conclusion, Chidubem Iweka's *The Ancient Curse* depicts certain messages for humanity like any other literary work. The novel dwells on the exploration of the roles, manifestations and influences of the supernatural agents in the work of art. The work dwells on ancient myths, legends, rituals, magic, witches, primordial images (powers, forces that existed from the beginning of time), gods, goddesses, spirits, ancestral ancient powers, ghosts, mystical powers and unforeseen forces. The author believes in the powers of dreams. He believes that the spirits walk in the midst of men, they sing and lament to show their unhappiness.

This study shows the beauty, serenity, ambience and succor we find in nature. It shows that there is no escaping your roots, foundation, and culture. It has proved beyond reasonable doubt that we didn't hear of culture from the whites for me first time. It corrects the disillusioned image of Africans as animals and shows that we had gods or deities that we served before the whites came. We had beliefs, culture, norms, superstitions, rites and rituals that we observed and still observe. It has shown that we had our philosophy, we knew how to farm, read and write in our own way, we danced, we cried, we did things together. The study shows that we had a proper community and a communal life that we were comfortable in.

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