

Review

Neonaticide: A philosophical review of the killing of neonate twins in *Things Fall Apart*

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Neonaticide in *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) had relative stands, mostly intentional yet mostly unwillful. In the shame of committing neonaticide, blame and responsibility is not easily placed between the earth goddess and the parents of the neonate twins. To uphold the common weal of the community, twins born in Umuofia and the other eight Igbo villages were to be destroyed according to the divine command. The interest of this paper is to investigate the rationality in the practice of neonaticide in TFA through the spectrum of the Divine Command Theory. The paper further discusses the babies' rights, juxtaposing it to the native's unhesitating act of killing neonate twins. Overlooking the newborns' rights to life and the Europeans' deterrent effort of criminalizing neonaticide in these villages, the natives adamantly killed neonates. And, many parents who had twins at childbirth faced or committed neonaticide as a utilitarian act to sustain the purity of the society at the expense of the lives of neonate twins.

Key words: Neonaticide, reincarnation, neonate twins, earth goddess.

INTRODUCTION

Neonaticide remains a crucial and prevalent ethical subject in the twentieth and twenty-first century, having its permissibility deserving an infallible justification. The issue of neonaticide has gained several concerns in moral philosophy, applied ethics (bioethics). Debates on neonaticide (Spain, 2013; Olejarz, 2017; Klier et al., 2019) has revolved around the causes of neonaticide and some of the root causes are later identified and discussed as intentional and unintentional neonaticide. For instance, a new mother kills her baby by repeatedly feeding the baby indigestible food or leaving the baby out in the sun. In any of these two incidents, the psyche of the new mother needs to be examined to see whether the act was immoral or a moral. If it is out of ignorance or forgetfulness, then it is immoral and unethical, on the

other hand if it was due to some mental disorder or postpartum depression then the mother will need psychological assistance (de Wijs-Heijlaerts et al., 2012). However, on relatively justifiable grounds some societies have been practicing neonaticide and earliest examples can be found in the Spartan and Athenian cultures, where babies with deformities were disposed and left to die (Pomeroy et al., 2004). The article attempts to split the dilemma of who to blame; whether the earth goddess or the parents of the newborn. Where the parents disobey the earth goddess to save and commit a taboo or obey the earth goddess and commit neonaticide?

In Umuofia, Mbanta, and the other villages, the depth of implications on the bearing of abominable children made neonaticide a necessity when a woman bore neonate

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twins. The pre-colonial setting of *Things Fall Apart* (*TFA*) was devoid of any modern technological embellishment to neither commit an abortion nor determine how many children there were in a pregnant woman's womb. Otherwise, the only method of evading the curse and blemish of a twin was the disposal and destruction at birth. Like neonaticide is infanticide; even though both involve killing children, neonaticide is the killing of an offspring about twenty-four hours after birth (Resnick, 1970). Studies have shown diverse situations mothers or other people commit neonaticide (Green and Manohar, 1990; Bonnet, 1993; Meyer and Oberman, 2001).

However, this article critically looks at neonaticide in the pre-colonial period in West Africa based on Chinua Achebe's fiction novel, *TFA*. The examinable issue on neonaticide in *TFA* includes the justification for the sanction and the preclusion of offspring and any rights whatsoever. Despite these critical issues, reincarnation and neonaticide are worth discussing because these phenomena bear adverse implications on the lives of many offspring.

NEONATICIDE

Refining Resnick's definition of neonaticide, Bonnet (1993) categorizes neonaticide into active and passive neonaticide. Active neonaticide is the direct killing of a baby within twenty-four hours after birth in a violent or abusive manner. Unlike active neonaticide, passive neonaticide is not defined by a direct or violent approach. Passive neonaticide mainly involves negligence on the parent's part twenty-four hours after birth (Drescher-Burke et al., 2004). In assessing these two categories of neonaticide, active neonaticide is intentional while passive neonaticide is unintentional. However, the level of intentionality informs us of the parents' utmost dislike for the baby.

Such direct murder of the baby by the parent is termed filicide (*ibid.*). On the other hand, passive neonaticide is more regretful because it happens due to ignorance or inattentiveness on the baby. It is realised that culprits of neonaticide are primarily young adults below twenty-five years or fresh mothers (*ibid.*).

Neonaticide has been prevalent in human society as civilisations developed and has been justified for several reasons, namely; child disability, the need or primacy for male children, religious reasons, poverty, and a medium to control the population (Meyer and Oberman, 2001). It has been a crucial issue for discussion dating from the 18th century (Resnick, 1970) to the 20th century (Brozovsky and Falit, 1971). In contemporary times, neonaticide is hard to come by; however, it is still practiced. Mostly, neonates are either found disposed or dead by janitors or random people as they follow blood trails or when a woman reports an emergency at the hospital, and the doctors find the remains of a placenta

inside her (Drescher-Burke et al., 2004). In the modern-day, most neonaticide mothers are young and unmarried and maybe psychotic or depressed. These conditions may have had the mother lost interest in having the baby right after conception or pregnancy. So, most parents who commit neonaticide kill by drowning, strangulation, head trauma and suffocation rather than weapons.

In Resnick's studies, Central Africa is one of the places he named to have evidence of neonaticide. However, the killing of neonates is not new to other African societies. Besides the cases from Central Africa, *TFA* depicts the existential case of neonaticide among the Igbo people of Nigeria. The killing or abandoning of neonate twins was factual among the Igbo clans (Ben-Nun, 2017). The case of neonaticide was based on religious and superstitious justification, thus, it was highly intentional and organized. Despite the intentionality of the action, most culprits in *TFA* did not do it willingly; they were compelled or motivated to destroy their twins for a utilitarian satisfaction.

THE CURSE OF TWINS

The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender (Achebe, *TFA*: 41; 1992).

In the village of Umuofia, Mbanta and the neighboring villages, the earth goddess has decreed to destroy twins immediately after birth, precluding them from society. According to the earth goddess, the presence and induction of twins soil the purity of the land. And upon her decree, such abomination will unleash her wrath on the land and the people. That implies that the whole community is to bear the consequences dictated by the sanction for the acceptance of twins. It follows that, the people were implicitly obliged to be vigilant on pregnancies to know the outcome among the clans. Thus, the principle of twins' unacceptance is enforced as a communal duty to maintain a utilitarian consequence of not provoking the earth goddess.

A deontological pronouncement of this decree leads to a conflict of interest. The conflict results in a dilemma when a duty-based act (the decree to kill twins) which is requisite, compelling and action bound, is put against one's interest. Moreover, to avoid condemnation, it is required not to do contrary to the decree. This makes the killing of the neonate, sometimes not willful, but a necessary evil. Even though the killing of the neonates may be purposive or intentional, it does not preclude the individual's unwillingness to have done it. Like Akueni and Nneka (Achebe, *TFA*: 44; 1992), some women were never pleased nor willingly destroyed their neonate twins.

On the contrary, most other women and families dogmatically obeyed the decree of the goddess.

Similarly, in Mbanta, Akueni had accepted her fate of bearing and losing her neonate twins with philosophical calmness. Nneka endured her misery and humbly waited for redemption.

Many others followed this decree without reflection and examination despite the chills it gave them, knowing a baby was to be destroyed. Even in the awakening of a personal experience, like that of Obiereka (Okwonko's good friend), after destroying his wife's twins, he only questioned himself but failed to challenge the sanction of the earth goddess (Achebe, *TFA*: 41; 1992). To critically question the decree by the earth goddess was almost impossible because it puts one against the people and the earth goddess. The sanction of the goddess remained appealing because there was a known proverb that enforces the decree's implementation. The proverb says, "If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others." (*ibid.*). This proverb enforced the decree because of the impact of punishment if the decree was to be disobeyed.

In the absence of the rationale for the decree, the punishment for the inaction of others during the birth of a twin is sufficient reason to prevent this abominable act. The earth goddess is never obliged to explain itself or the decrees to its subjects, thereby explicating the rationale for the decree. Just as a god/goddess may speak, it was a divine command, and it demanded obedience without reasoning. This line of reasoning does not evade the issue of sanctioning. Whether the goddess sanctions the birth of a twin as a curse because the action itself is a curse or the birth of a twin is a curse because it is originally a sin and not because the goddess sanctions it to be a curse. To the people of Umuofia, Mbanta and the neighboring villages, because the goddess sanctions it as a curse, then the birth of a twin, when the twin is not destroyed, it remains a curse on the land. However, it could be believed that the birth of a twin is an original sin that had its genesis in some historical events. For this latter reason, then if the earth goddess sanctioned the birth of twins as a curse, it was because of the doom of the twins. Nevertheless, in the absence of any foretold history on the doom of the birth of the twins, the people believe that the gods determine their good. Hence, the earth goddess detests and curses the birth of twins. For this curse, all neonate twins in Umuofia, Mbanta and neighbouring villages were put in an earthenware bowl and disposed of in total rejection in the evil forest. The evil forest is cursed and all abominable and impurities had to go there.

THE ALIENATION OF TWINS

In the discussions of rights, a twin had no say in Umuofia, Mbanta and the neighbouring villages. There was no dilemma of whether the baby's mother or the baby had to be saved. The woman's survival was prime unless she had sinned against the land or her people. Whether, the

babies have the right to life or not; it was pre-determined and precluded by the earth goddess. The babies are human and wholly formed offspring at the point of birth, but the sanction, even in the acceptance that they are of human life, still destroys life.

Like the *osu* (the village outcasts), the twins were cut off from society and had no place for participation (Achebe, *TFA*: 51; 1992). The people of the villages believed that the gods would condemn the twins and the outcasts. As long as the twins and *osu* stayed in the evil forest living in seclusion, the natives were spared any attachment with the curse and calamity of the twins.

REINCARNATION AND NEONATICIDE

Reincarnation was a well-grounded belief in Umuofia, Mbanta and the neighbouring villages. The people of the clan shared testimonies of several children who came to life, died and came back through the same mother. The reincarnated children were called *ogbanje* and were known as a bad omen. These children gave no rest to their mothers and caused their parent so much pain because, after birth, they may live for only some months or years but will come back through the same mother (Achebe, *TFA*: 25; 1992). Most of such children were given names to communicate that they were not to die again or come back. Some of these names were "Onwumbiko – death I implore you", "Ozoemena – may it not happen again", and "Onwuma – death may please itself" (*ibid.*). Aside from their kind of naming, most of them were mutilated, and they bear some marks from mutilation. In the vicious cycle of birth and death, most of these *ogbanjes* come at birth with some mutilation marks from the past life, so they are quickly identified. Rather than killing them as neonates, the single children are given a chance to live. The proposed remedy to end the vicious cycle was to find and crush the *iyi-uwa*, the stone linking the *ogbanje* and the spirit world (Achebe, *TFA*: 26; 1992).

Projecting from the particular cases of reincarnation in *TFA*, there could have been coincidental cases of twins who were an *ogbanje*. Nevertheless, such cases never come up in *TFA* because the status of neonates as twins precludes their right to life. They are treated lesser than the outcasts. Twins had no chance to live and die and come back in the vicious cycle of birth and death. The natives never conceived of twins as *ogbanje*.

IMPLICATIONS OF BEING BORN A TWIN

The implications of being born a twin were terrible. Twins are denied the right to life because the divine precludes it. Also, knowing that some twins are sometimes saved in the evil forest by the *osu*, then even if they lived, just as the *osu*, they were non-participatory of the clans'

membership rights. This includes living in seclusion in the evil forest, no trimming of the hair, no participation with the free-born, neither can they rank in the four titles of the clan, and when they died, they were to be buried in the evil forest.

The birth of a twin was troubling for society, and repeated cases had critical implications for the mother. Apart from the misery of Akueni, Nneka also had fingers pointing at her. Nneka's repeated birth of twins had been a stain on her integrity as an African woman. There is so much pride in the birth of many children and especially sons, as mentioned during Obiereka's daughter's marriage (Achebe, *TFA*: 39; 1992). So, as precious as a son or daughter may be, twins were abominable. Moreover, a woman who bears many twins is a bearer of curses. This gravely affected Nneka as her husband and his family remained critics of her.

THE EUROPEAN INFLUENCE

The coming of the white man had led to other reformations in these villages (Utuk, 1975). According to the natives and their elders, the white man did not know their ways, disregarded their culture and values, and preached a strange god. The Europeans were superimposing their ways and perspectives on the natives. The difference in the white man's ways and that of the natives implied abominable acts by the white man. One of such acts was the acceptance of twins.

This new god had no condemnation towards twins because it was not a god of the native's land. The white man's god provided shelter for twins, and even though this was problematic for the natives, the church (which was the shelter) was on the land of the evil forest. So, the natives believed that the gods of the land would deal with Christians and their converts. Now converts included the troubled woman, Nneka. For the fingers that pointed at her, the new religion was the rescue for her, and she needed not to commit neonaticide because the neonates were twins. The white man's ways were abominable because they were blinded to the inherent relationship between the ways of the people and their African Religion (Mbiti, 1975). The culture of the people was tied with their religion.

Awaiting the condemnation of the gods on the Christians, the sanction of the gods seemed meaningless as Mr. Kiaga, the white missionary, confessed to no harm or threat by the gods (Achebe, *TFA*: 51; 1992). The inaction of the gods to punish the Christians seems to indicate that their gods were powerless, but dogmatically, the natives held up to their beliefs. Soon after, the white man's court was imprisoning and punishing the natives for the neonaticide. Most of the natives who witnessed and understood the outturn of events might critically wonder. They may wonder whether the gods were right or wrong, whether the curse was a stipulation by the gods

to please themselves, or the birth of twins was originally manure for doom.

CONCLUSION

Neonaticide in *TFA* was an organized act for it was to the knowledge of all. It cannot be called an organised crime because it did not break any established law. Neither can one claim the neonaticide in *TFA* was immoral too. It cannot be immoral for the fact that the gods had sanctioned it. Instead, it was a moral act to commit neonaticide since one will be acting on the duty instructed via a divine command. The eventful nature of disposing of the babies in the evil forest had many aware, so the parent of the twin may express their patriotism for the clan. Unlike the conception of neonaticide in the modern-day, in *TFA*, it was no secret. However, aside from the religious and superstitious justification of neonaticide in *TFA*, the act remains problematic, knowing that some innocent neonates were killed right after birth. They had been executed before their birth and had no chance to alter their fate. These neonates, if were treated as equally human and given a chance to live, may grow to defend why they still needed to have life and make a living in the nine Igbo villages. In the absence of an opportunity for the neonates to defend themselves, they take the life out of them when they are most vulnerable. Broadly, the justification for the killing of neonates in *TFA* is not sufficient, and the decorated act of neonaticide was an injustice to the innocent neonates.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflicts of interests.

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