The ogbanje who wanted to stay,

The occult, belonging, family and therapy in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Although prominent in literature on West Africa and especially Nigeria, the phenomenon of ogbanjes in Sierra Leone is little discussed. By following the story of one ogbanje, this paper unravels their significance for social life, for local epistemologies and cosmologies in Freetown. The paper discusses personhood and morality, conceptions of femininity and motherhood as well as the search for culprits. It argues that ogbanjes have to be understood as avengers, who, in the name of society, penalize those deeds of women which meet with the disapproval of the community. Ogbanjes embody a breakdown of accepted social concepts as they are able to openly articulate criticism towards their parents and elders and thus serve as a way to negotiate the coming of age. The negotiations over appropriate treatment of ogbanjes highlight the interplay between different forms of belief. In addition, ogbanjes provide coping mechanisms and explanatory tools for untimely deaths.

Keywords

Sierra Leone, ogbanje, occult, belonging, motherhood, family, therapy, coming of age, femininity.

The bow of the fishing vessel steers on through the foamy wave-tops. The ripples grow bigger and the sky darkens behind the weight of towering clouds that pile up with an ever-increasing speed. As we slide up and down, wavelength after wavelength, the amplitude of those huge billows swells in equal measure to my nervousness. The thrill of the moment when the boat reaches the height of the crest, points its bow into the air, then on a sudden plunges down, has begun to feel far more like falling than like flying. The men on-board are celebrating. They are, it seems, undisturbed by the fact that none of them can swim, and that the distance between the shore and us increases with each wave. The winds grow rougher, dashing salty water over our bodies and into the boat; the men dance and sing whilst plastic bottles of palm wine are passed from hand to hand. Their songs narrate stories of bravery, of masculinity, and courtship. When the first drops dribble from the newly blackened sky, the atmosphere amongst them is still cheerful and relaxed. That is until one of the passengers starts shaking uncontrollably, and shortly after loses consciousness.

This paper discusses the phenomenon of the ogbanje in Freetown. Towards the end of my fieldwork in September 2013, Amadu[i], one of my main respondents started

experiencing severe physical attacks which nearly cost him his life and led him to reveal that he is an ogbanje. The paper follows the synopsis of Amadu's story and traces the multi-layered conceptions, cosmologies and relationships this narrative reveals about the phenomenon of the ogbanje in the multi-ethnic conglomerate of Freetown[ii]. It not only elaborates on the nature and form of these 'attacks', but also describes the negotiations taking place among kin and community as they decide how to (re-)act. Through them, notions of personhood and morality are discussed and the tension between private virtue and public morality is highlighted. The phenomenon of the ogbanje unravels local conceptions of nature, weather, and environment. Ogbanjes serve not only as a way to discuss the coming of age and analyses of fault, but also the relationship between mother and son, the hegemonic roles and responsibilities of women in urban Sierra Leone and the evaluation of a woman's actions by her community. Ogbanjes therefore come to symbolize conceptions of motherhood and femininity in Freetown. Additionally, through narrating how various religious healers were consulted, local notions of therapy are discussed. These processes render visible the interplay between different forms of belief and the application of local cosmologies in the negotiations over appropriate treatment. Amadu's case reveals the struggle to make a living in post-war and post-Ebola Sierra Leone, where development discourses are *en vogue*, but daily life is dictated by pervasive insecurity.

There is already a large body of literature on ogbanjes[iii]/abikus (See for example Aji and Ellsworth, 1992; Bryce, 2008; Hawley, 1995; Kortenaar, 2007; Douglas McCabe, 2002; Merlo, 1975; Mobolade, 1973; Ngugi, 2009; Okonkwo, 2004, 2008; Okri, 1992; Specht, 2013; Ouma, 2014; Smalligan, 2011; Vambe, 2012). Several African writers and poets have incorporated ogbanjes in their works and have inspired critical-reflexive reviews by academics (see Achebe, 1986; Morrison, 1987; Soyinka, 1994; cf. Soliman, and سليمان منيرة, 2004). The concept of ogbanjes has been applied to describe different socio-political agendas at different times in history (Soliman, and سليمان منيرة, 2004: 150f). The notion serves as a methaphor for 'the relationship between the physical and the spirit world, the idea of predestination, and the concept of reincarnation' (Soliman, and منيرة سليمان, 2004: 150f). It highlights ideas of embodiment, memory, and undercurrents of the past in the present.

> The metaphysical idea of ogbanje and the notion of a rebirth serve as a master-narrative of the parent-child relationship in Pan-African socio-political contexts and literary texts. Since abiku/ogbanje evokes the past, with its separations and instability, the concept can serve as a springboard for examining issues of memory, reading in an oral culture, migrations, and conversations (and silences) that link West Africa with the Americas' (Ogunyemi, 2002: 663).

Academics have explored the connection between ogbanjes' charateristics and psychopathology (Ilechukwu, 2007), under-five mortality (Ogunjuyigbe, 2004), medical conditions such as sickle cell disease (Nzewi, 2001), childhood disease management Feyisetan et al., 1997), healing (Southgate, 2005), or paranormal occult phenomena (Uche and Uche, NY). Ogbanjes serve as a trope to explain notions of kinship and belonging. They highlight frictions between rural and urban traditions (Ogunyemi, 2002), between western influences and local epistemologies and cosmologies, between ancestral hierarchy, familial origin, and the extended lineage as well as the nation state in Nigeria (Soliman, and سليمان منيرة, 2004: 154). Furthermore, ogbanjes incorporate the tension between individual and community needs and aspirations (Soliman, and سليمان منيرة, 2004: 154).

Although conceptions of ogbanjes are found in many West African countries, the literature focuses largely on Nigeria. Sierra Leone inspired countless ethnographies on notions of the occult, but there are no studies of ogbanjes which go beyond discussing them as impermanent spirit children who cause pain amongst those they leave behind in their spiralling cycles of life and death. However, ogbanjes are much more than that. This paper lifts such narratives out of the Nigerian context and explores the way in which ogbanjes in Sierra Leone inform local epistemologies, cosmologies, and issues of morality and appropriate behaviour[iv].

In Sierra Leone, seminal ethnographic explorations on the Kuranko (Jackson, 1977, 1989, 1990) or the Mende (Ferme, 2001) among others have shaped our understanding of local views, practices and beliefs. Anthropologists thematised witchcraft (e.g. Shaw 1997; Parish 2005), drew connections between memory, violence and history (such as Shaw 2001, 2007) explored sodalities (among others Butt-Thompson, 1929; Bjälkander et al., 2012; Bosire, 2012; Hoffer, 1975; Jedrej, 1974,1976,1986; Lamp, 1985,1988; Little, 1949, 1965, 1966) and worked on the influence of secrecy in the formation of social categories, and groups as well as on the distribution of influence and power (e.g. Bledsoe, 1980; Bledsoe and Robey, 1986; Murphy, 1980). This paper contributes an urban multi-ethnic perspective on ogbanjes to this rich body of literature on religion, magic, and witchcraft and complements works on urban social relations starting with Michael Banton's study of social systems (1956, 1957), Abner Cohen's on the Creole (1981), John Nunley's on Odelay masquerades (1987, 1988) or Samuel Mark Anderson's on traditional healers (forthcoming) in Freetown.

Amadu's state shifts permanently. At one moment his body is pulled up, moves abruptly back and forth and falls back down with arms reaching to the side before collapsing again as if fighting against an enemy we cannot see. His face expresses pure horror as he is rolling his eyes and making incomprehensible sounds. At the next he crawls under the bench in the middle of the boat begging 'them' to leave him alone. Then he loses consciousness again before the scenes repeat themselves. The crew hectically

debates possible (re)actions. Whilst some are convinced that Amadu poses a threat to them and has to be thrown overboard, others make an argument to save him based on compassion. Eventually all agree to head to the next shore.

We finally reach Banana Island, but before the men can pull the boat on the sand, a group of the island's inhabitants surround us. They demand that we either send Amadu away by himself or that we all depart immediately. 'He cannot stay here. He will endanger us all' states their leader blocking the path which leads away from the beach (Osman Touré, 2013, personal communication).

After heated negotiations and under the condition that a healer is consulted immediately, we are allowed to stay and carry Amadu to one of the nearby huts. What follows is a night of intense discussions between the family that hosts us and the crew about the fate of Amadu. Amadu's state shifts from pain stricken consciousness to fainting fits that plunge him into less clear levels of awareness.

Ogbanjes – the avengers of women's sins

Two days later and right before various medical and religious practitioners start knocking at Amadu's door offering different pathways to his cure, Amadu shares his life story with me. Ogbanjes, he explains, are spirits who normally inhabit a realm far from the world of humans. They are led by the ogbanje-mother and fulfil the purpose of punishing the

wrongdoing of women on earth. To do so, they crawl into the wombs of pregnant women who have had an abortion or were unfaithful, eat the foetuses that should grow there and take over their space.

After consuming the foetus and mirroring its physical characteristics, ogbanjes attempt to 'bring troubles' to the women whose wombs they occupy by causing a stressful pregnancy and a difficult birth. They then enter the world and aim to win over the hearts of the families they live with. In the course of this, some ogbanjes forget their real identity and completely immerse themselves in the human world. Amadu clarifies: 'A strong ogbanje will always know who he is and only pretend. He will communicate with his ogbanje siblings and can see the bodies they live in. A young and weak ogbanje will forget the mother [of all ogbanjes] and will only be reminded of his true identity when it is time for him to return home' (Amadu Conteh, 2013, personal communication).

When his contractually agreed time on earth expires, the ogbanje mother will call on the ogbanje's spirit siblings to initiate his return. In most cases this leads to a sudden death of the ogbanje as he leaves the host body behind. By aggrieving the woman, whose child he pretended to be and those she loves over his loss, the ogbanje retaliates her wrongdoings. In Freetown, ogbanjes therefore have to be understood as avengers, who, in the name of society, penalize those deeds of women which meet with the disapproval of the community. They embody the rules and values of society, mirror women's actions against them and punish deviations. By punishing not only an individual woman, but her

entire family, ogbanjes provide an example which is supposed to hinder others from following in her footsteps.

After returning ogbanjes stay in their world for some time before being sent on another mission. These missions are always agreed upon previously and undertaken on a contractual basis. Ogbanjes are therefore interconnected with the spirit world, but are not possessed (Bastian, 1997: 117). The stronger ogbanjes become, the more their memory increases, and after several life-circles, they remember all their lives, the bodies they inhabited, siblings and parents they had, and activities they undertook.

Amadu states that this is his 17th stay on earth. 'I have been all sexes and shapes and characters' (Amadu Conteh, 2013, personal communication) he explains: 'In the beginning it was sad sometimes, but then it was much like a game, but also so confusing. I am very good at making the humans love me and the mother [of the ogbanjes] likes me very much' (Amadu Conteh, 2013, personal communication).

His shortest stay on earth was a little over a month, his longest is the current one. Amadu is about to turn 25. 'The stay depends on the seriousness of the bad woman's crimes' he says. 'The worse it is, the longer I or others stay. But normally no more than five or seven years. Because the longer you live among them the more they will get attached and then hurt when you die' (Amadu Conteh, 2013, personal communication).

In the majority of cases ogbanjes return home at a very young age. If a child dies, the explanation that he must have been an ogbanje is often heard and serves as one coping

mechanism for such untimely deaths. In the very rare cases, such as Amadu's, where a teenager or adult confesses or is accused of being an ogbanje, this follows attacks which are interpreted as an occult illness.

Very rarely, Amadu states, do ogbanjes get attached to one of these lives and, unwilling to return, try to cut their ties to the ogbanje world. Amadu is one of these unusual cases. He has come to love his host family, desires to create a family on his own and is tired of the constant changes. 'This tornness [sic] is too much. No more wandering and roaming around' (Amadu Conteh, 2013, personal communication).

However, breaches of an ogbanje's contract are unacceptable to the ogbanje mother as they defeat the purpose of the ogbanjes. If an ogbanje attempts to stay on earth, his spirit community will try everything in their power to force him to return. Fellow spirit children will send warnings in the form of dream messages.

Amadu recounts: 'Until sometime ago they [the ogbanjes] only contacted me in my sleep. A few months back they started calling for me, but I refuse' (Amadu Conteh, 2013, personal communication). Due to the dream world being as real to my respondents as the waking one, the threats Amadu received in his dreams were unquestionably real to him (Bellman, 1979: 107f). My respondents believe that clairvoyant people have the ability to separate body and soul during the night and carry out their activities whilst the body gets the necessary rest. Additionally, people can be attacked in their dreams with severe

effects on their physical bodies. Dreams can thus serve as a warning of immediate danger, but also as places where attacks are executed.

If the resisting ogbanje does not succumb to these dream messages, he will be tormented with frequent hallucinations and disturbing visions. As a last resort the spirit community will forcefully try to disconnect the rebel from his human body. Amadu recounts that his spirit siblings insert loud and disturbing commands in his head that are repeated until he listens to them. He states that he can see them on the street mixed in with the rest of the population, following him, and calling for him.

> They are very strong. They make you do things. I can see them pulling me on the road so that I can get hit by a car. It is very hard for me not to go. One day I was playing with my friend on the beach and they started waving and calling for me in the water. I just went in the water. But I cannot swim and I almost drowned. Now they get louder. In the boat so, so many were pulling me trying to reach my back' (Amadu Conteh, 2013, personal communication).

Amadu notes that all ogbanjes carry a box on their back which is invisible to non-clairvoyant people and contains the elements of the ogbanje's soul and source of power over the inhabited body. If this backpack is ripped away ogbanjes lose their connection to the human body and snap back to their world. This is especially interesting as it parts

with all other published works on ogbanjes. Sunday Ilechukwu (2007: 241) for example explains that the Igbo ogbanje life contract

> has a concrete representation in the form of a stone but could be any concrete object. Chinua Achebe (1958), defines Iyiuwa [lit. life contract] as a special kind of stone (‘‘boundstone’’) which forms the link between an ogbanje and the spiritual ‘companions’ and narrates that ‘only if the Iyiuwa were discovered and destroyed would the child not die’.

Maduka reiterates: ‘The object of the oath is hidden away from ordinary human sight and usually buried under a huge tree, in the person's palm or in other impressive places’ (1987: 18). Whilst in the case of Sierra Leone this object, which contains the life contract and stores the human element of the spirit, takes the form of a box on the back, which has to be protected in order to break the contract, in Nigeria, this object has to be destroyed to cut the ties with the ogbanjes.

Amadu illutrates how, during the attacks which he will be fighting for months, the abrupt movements of his body have to be interpreted as the struggle to keep his back protected whilst ogbanjes pull him in different directions in order to take the box.

Amadu describes his emotional state as overwhelming and explains the difficulty of balancing the attachment to the ogbanjes with steadily growing feelings towards the family he is supposed to be hurting. Amadu states that these conflicts worsen the longer an ogbanje remains on earth. In our conversations, Amadu’s conflict of interest was

painfully evident. Vacillating between his feelings towards his family and the responsibilities towards the ogbanjes, he is unsure where he really belongs. He is torn between different expectations and oscillating between relationships. Renouncing one identity for the sake of the other will lead to suffering and punishment. If he agrees to fulfil his mission, he causes pain to the people he has come to love. If he aims to remain on earth, he hurts his spirit community. The ogbanje's internal division does not stop with choosing one side, but extends into conflicting views about individuals. This becomes especially apparent in Amadu's complicated relationship with his current birth mother, Aminata, as he simultaneously loves her and openly disagrees with her choice to abort pregnancies.

In Freetown, ogbanjes have the rare opportunity to voice the longing and loathing, the pushes and pulls that accompany the coming of age and to speak openly about that which cannot normally be discussed. Growing up is inevitably connected to questions of belonging and identification. My respondents recounted the processes through which they peeled childhood off their skins with great ambivalence. During teenage years, the desire for self-development and independence enters into a tense relationship with the necessity to remain intrinsically connected to one's family (Bledsoe, 1980; Diggins, 2015; Richards, 2005). Young people's life choices affect the status of their families permanently and irrevocably. However, there is no way to articulate openly these inner contradictions and criticize one's parents. My respondents greatly value discretion and

'consciously willed concealment' (Simmel, 1906: 449) dominates articulations. Children learn quickly to refrain from using definite statements and to stay non-committal, ready to contradict themselves in the same breath as their former argument.

In her work on the Mende, Mariane Ferme explains that '[g]reat value is attached to verbal artistry that couches meaning in puns, riddles, and cautionary tales' (2001: 7) and that people learn to deliver opinions in a dialogic manner through which they are 'provided in encoded form' (Ferme, 2001: 230). Youth approaching their parents with differing opinions normally invoke a careful dance around their argument whose steps are enacted in obscure, illicit communication. People, who use direct speech and committed statements when they voice criticism break this expected performance which leads to them being disrespected and considered idiotic or no better than children (Ferme, 2001: 7). There is therefore no way for young people to articulate their views directly without losing integrity and respect. This leads to much pressure especially for young men from rural backgrounds who have emigrated to the capital, Freetown, in order to construct a new life. Many of my respondents feel responsible for their parents and guilty for leaving them behind. The pressure between balancing their personal aspirations and the desire to satisfy the expectations of their families, who often rely on their contributions results in complex compromises with regards to marriage partners, job prospects, and living environments. In a country where one's success is intrinsically

linked to that of one's family, independence does not mean independence from one's family, but rather independence with one's family.

By not only freely and publicly stating their opinions about their kin, but also judging their actions, ogbanjes break with the rules of conduct normally expected from sons and daughters. They embody the direct opposite of the obedient and silently revolting youth as they openly point fingers and criticize the actions of their kin that they consider inappropriate.

At the same time the concept of the ogbanje intensifies the inner contentions of youth as ogbanjes are not only torn between different life choices, but between different worlds. Amadu's story therefore incorporates the ubiquities of other hidden realities which interfere with everyday life.

Perceptions of visibility and extended worlds

The phenomenon of the ogbanje demonstrates than an understanding of my respondents' perceptions of the world cannot be reduced to that which is visible. None of the people who were confronted with Amadu's story questioned the fact that he is being attacked or possessed, by a transcendent being. Who it was who attacked him and what was to be done was very much in dispute. However, the fact that his suffering was of an occult

nature, and was potentially life-threatening to Amadu, was undisputed by my interviewees, as was the fact that it was potentially harmful to others.

To my respondents the presence of alternative worlds is evident, but not all can see beyond the essences of the world they inhabit. The occult is closely related to conceptions of seeing, and people are perceived as either one eyed (innocent) or two eyed (clairvoyant) (Nyamnjoh 2001). The view of innocent people is limited to the human world. Clairvoyant people can see through, behind, and underneath things. For them the boundaries between body and soul, visible and invisible and this world and other worlds dissolve. Because of their farsightedness and insight, they are perceived as highly powerful. According to my respondents, all human beings enter the world with this ability. As infants and young children, they are able to see the ancestors and the spirits (Ferme 2001). Small children are still undefined and malleable. They are easily impressionable and their fate is yet indeterminate as they might leave the world at any time to chase after the temptations of another. However, in the process of developing a personality and learning and internalizing the values of society, this ability fades as children bind themselves to the human world. Amongst clairvoyant adults are those who use their powers to do good such as healers and those who abuse their abilities to bring misery and destitution to their victims such as witches. Ogbanjes are generally categorized as belonging to the latter category. However, their status is ambivalent as they can use their abilities to protect humans from harmful spirits when they decide to

remain on earth. Negotiations of visibility, insight, and trust greatly influence social relations. In fact, as Henrik Vigh stipulates 'the idea of 'having eyes' and the striving for apprehension, insights, and overviews (…) relates to the very condition of sociality itself' (2015: 121). In Sierra Leone, visible and invisible forces join hands in the permeation of social life. 'The idea of obscure potencies can, thus, be seen as grounded in what Weber calls *vielseitigkeit* that is, in many sidedness' (Weber, 1958: 194 cited in Vigh, 2015: 121).

Nature – host and gateway between worlds

Next to a whole world ever present, but inconspicuous and hidden from the eyes of most people, the environment plays a great role with regards to the power of spirits over its landscape and over people who inhabit it. Almost all natural surroundings which are in a transitional stage, for example between day and night (e.g. dusk and dawn) or rain and drought are avoided by people who are susceptible to attacks. Among the most popular places of ambiguity are beaches at twilight, and any location which is foggy. Furthermore, places which are not clearly visible or are extremely noisy such as busy markets or the bush, along with moving places such as boats are greatly feared. My respondents explained that the soul cannot rest on moving surfaces at it is uncertain about its surroundings and is in constant flux. The ocean is a place of great mystery hosting

landscapes and creatures who are unknown and invisible to the human eye. Unpredictable and impenetrable worlds lie hidden beyond the surface of the water. The sea is controlled by water deities such as mami wata who guard the 'water entry port into the human world' (Ilechukwu, 2007: 240). Mami wata has been interpreted as one of the spirits leading the ogbanjes (Ilechukwu, 2007: 240; cf. Bastian, 1997; Drewal, 1988, 2008) and Amadu described dreams and visions about water as a symbol of the ogbanjes' call to come home and a warning to comply (see also Achebe 1986). According to my respondents such deities tend to tempt persons traveling on or near water and readily capture those souls who are too weak to resist. People with spiritual problems therefore need to stay away from water in order to stay safe. In addition, weather is often interpreted as a mirror of people's morality and a judge of their actions. Flooding, droughts, humidity, extreme heat, and unforgiving winds, are all conditions often understood to be the consequence of ancestors' or spirits' disapproval with the actions of the living. Storms were once described to me as 'distant roars from another world discontent with our performance' (Samuel Jalloh, 2012, personal communication). Mild climate, soft rain and the adjournment of floods or extreme droughts are understood to be a reward of societal correctness. Amadu's water-travels were condemned by my respondents as irresponsible and dangerous. 'He put his soul in too much danger opening up for all spirits floating around ready to capture him' stated one traditional healer (Sulaiman Kabbah, 2013, personal communication). Knowing that he attempts to break his life-contract with the

ogbanjes Amadu should not have travelled through or near water and should have avoided being outdoors during storms stated my respondents.

In order to appreciate how Amadu, his kin and his community interpret their situation, the multi-layered realities of interlacing worlds and that which is invisible has to be included into analyses (Ellis, 1999; Nyamnjoh, 2001; cf. White 2003). The powers of an inspirited environment, the messages of deities transported through natural phenomena as well as weather conditions shape my respondents' relationship to people, spirits, and the environment. My respondents live in a boundlessness world that includes an invisible dimension of spirits, ghosts and witches (Piot, 1999: 18f, Jackson 2012: 98f), an animated natural environment, as well as an all-too-real oneiric world. Amadu's family and community interpret these interlacing, porous worlds. They evaluate Amadu's trustworthiness, intentions and morality, his behaviour and his social standing in the community against the potential threat he poses to them. This 'weighing' (Beckman, 2015: 7) speaks volumes about the way in which social relationships are built and reflected upon.

Relational persons' actions within spheres of multiple influence

In these processes of evaluation, notions of personhood are paramount. Local perceptions of personhood turn their back on the artificial construct of the *homo oeconomicus*. Rather,

personhood is the result of a combination of countless social encounters. It is, like Michael Jackson (2012) recognizes in his work on shape-shifting among the Kuranko, composed of and constituted by social relationships which are prioritized over individual identity. Persons should therefore like Charles Piot in his writings on Togo suggests be regarded not as having, but as being relations (Piot, 1999: 18). Piot reminds us that in West African epistemologies 'the action of a self is meaningful only in terms of its relations to another' and '[a]gency thus resides not within a singular identity (*within* the person) but in the relations people have with another – and in the relations differences construct' (1999: 120 original emphasis). Neither Amadu's nor his host families' behaviour can be comprehended within the framework of individualistic conceptions of self-other boundaries. Instead, the actions of an individual have significant consequences for his social networks. Aminata's abortion led to Amadu's current crisis of belonging. This in turn affects every family member especially Aminata. Boundaries between individuals are seen as fluid and permeable. Their diffuse borders are constantly shifting as relational selves go about their everyday lives (Piot, 1999: 18ff; cf. Trajano Filho, 2002). This relatedness and connectedness characterizes people's actions and directs the way that my respondents structure their lives and evaluate other people's behaviour.

Local epistemologies of femininity and motherhood

Francis Nyamnjoh's (2001) conceptions of African persons seen through the prism of 'domesticated agency' indefinitely grounded within social networks that grow and fail with the success of an individual, enhances this understanding further. Actions are weighed against the hegemonic discourse of appropriate behaviour. The popular epistemology depicts women as caring mothers and devoted wives. In addition, in a country where ones' status and influence does depend largely on the number of one's dependents and affiliations, children are seen as a valuable resource. They add to the wealth of a family[v] by contributing labour and through the remedies they send when they migrate. In addition, they care for their parents in old age. Furthermore, children are a direct consequence of a healthy relationship and a demonstration of women's and men's fertility and reproductive capabilities which ensure the continuation of lineages. Pregnant women who decide against motherhood act contrary to that epistemology. They situate themselves not within, but outside prevalent local conceptions. An analysis of their decisions with reference to the common apprehension allows for an appreciation of how respondents understand their worlds and position themselves in relation to others (Nyamnjoh, 2001: 29).

Aminata describes her decision to have an abortion as rooted between societal expectations and personal circumstances. When she 'got belle' she was confronted with

several problems. As is quite common in the capital, her husband does not live with her but with another wife in a different part in Freetown. Aminata already has three children. Additionally, one of her sisters, who lives in a village near Bo, has sent her four children to Aminata in order to attend school in Freetown. Consequently, Aminata is currently responsible for seven children. Her only help is Fatu, the girlfriend of her other sister's eldest son, who brought two children to the household. Aminata's husband's financial help is infrequent and Aminata struggles to make a living through petty trading. Due to the fact that her Sandé initiation did not go smoothly her vagina is scarred which leads to frequent complications. During childbirth, her vagina cannot dilate in order to deliver the baby. Aminata has already lost four children during labour and is afraid of giving birth again. Moreover, she is unsure whether she could adequately provide for another child and feels that she has fulfilled society's expectations by raising three children. When she realised that she was pregnant she went to a midwife to terminate the pregnancy. Shortly afterwards she became pregnant again. Aminata affirms: 'You see my husband he says if you use condoms with your own wife this is a sign that you cannot trust her no more because you don't know where she has been' (Aminata Conteh, 2013, personal conversation). Again, she went to see a midwife, but this time the termination was unsuccessful. 'I took every medicine, but the baby stayed and oh it burdened me too much.' Aminata articulates that she suspected this baby to be unusual as it persistently grew no matter how much she tried to 'get rid of it' (Aminata Conteh, 2013, personal

conversation). The pregnancy and birth were arduous. Notwithstanding, Aminata explains that from the moment Amadu was born 'he was the sweetest baby' (Aminata Conteh, 2013, personal conversation). Aminata highlights in detail how much joy and love Amadu has brought to the family, how nice, well-behaved and courteous he is. Interestingly, Aminata avows how Amadu's excellent character nourished her and others' suspicions. 'This boy is too sweet. I always fear he is here to punish me' (Aminata Conteh, 2013, personal conversation). Aminata explains how Amadu's actions were reflected upon with a far more critical eye than that of other family members. Especially his sister Zainab, she explains, could see in his eyes that he was 'one of the restless ones. The strangers who never sit still' (Aminata Conteh, 2013, personal conversation; cf. Bastian 1997). Amadu's illness is extremely difficult for Aminata. Since knowing that her son is an ogbanje she fears him and is unsure whether she wants him to stay. At the same time, she loves her son and is afraid of losing him. Not only does she blame herself for his condition, she also has to live with the disapproval of her social network. In a country in which most processes are transacted in secrecy and silence is an unspoken rule, the public knowledge of her abortion impedes her otherwise high standing in the community. Such personal choices are normally 'public secrets' (Coulter, 2009: 132). People are aware that abortions take place and might even know who decided against a pregnancy, but such actions are not discussed. Here, silence invokes tolerance. Public

knowledge and the impossibility of looking the other way leads to disapproval and shaming.

Aminata's situation reinforces the fact that people not only situate themselves in relation to the hegemonic epistemology. Rather, they are constantly situated by others who compare their behaviour with the dominant discourses (Nyamnjoh, 2001: 29). Aminata's choice to have an abortion was condemned by all others involved. Believing that through this action she brought the ogbanje crises upon them, my respondents blamed her for their fear and emotional confusion. However, they weighed Aminata's decisions against the backdrop of her social and economic situation. Her behaviour as wife and mother was seen as wholly positive. Thus their disapproval was lessened by their otherwise approving evaluation of Aminata's charater which ultimately led to an increased acceptance of her decisions.

My respondents' attitude towards Amadu was far more ambivalent. During my previous fieldwork in 2012, before Amadu revealed that he is an ogbanje, his name was always invoked when people indicated examples of good character. After his confession, this seeming perfection turned against him. People felt uneasy towards him as they had no way of knowing what he would do next. Additionally, they were unsure whether he himself or his spirit community might hurt them in the process of forcing Amadu to return to their society. In an environment largely dictated by insecurity, my respondents were looking for certainty and Amadu is all but that. Nevertheless, all agreed that Amadu's

treatment is paramount to his as well as the communities well-being and safety. However, the forms of treatment proposed differed greatly. These differences were rooted in my respondents' various denominations.

Treatment and denomination – two interdependent concepts

Religion is very important in Sierra Leone. Type of faith or denomination however are manifold, overlapping, fluid and not of crucial importance (Coulter, 2009: 33). Quite often different family members belong to different religions. Aminata is a Born-Again Christian, her husband is a Muslim and Fatu a Rastafari. People convert frequently, sometimes several times throughout their lives. Aminata's husband grew up in a Christian Orthodox family, but converted to Islam and Aminata switched several times between different Christian denominations. Whilst this variety leads to teasing and arguments between family members as they discuss and rate the credibility of different denominations, there is a general acceptance of an individual's choice of faith even between spouses. Quite often, people pick and choose from different religions in order to create their own fitting system. A process often referred to as chris-mus-rastafarying. Whilst conceptions of traditional healing are accepted by almost all of my respondents and thus depend neither on ethnicity nor on religion and they unanimously agree to

consult a healer in matters relating to (mis)fortune and spiritual illnesses, different faith communities offer different additional pathways to cure which leads to complex negotiations. Every group has their own mechanisms of treatment and all expect to carry out the necessary rituals. In Amadu's case this led to him being treated first by a healer. Subsequently, to reinforce the traditional healer's success, a Priest, a Mullah, and a Rastafari Preacher as well as a Sodality elder were consulted.

In Sierra Leone traditional and religious practitioners assess not only the physical, but also the social situation of a patient (Turner, 1968). The therapeutic choices thereby highlight systems of shared cultural values (Horton, 1967) which in the case of multiple systems of value originating within one family leads to the consultation of various healers. Illness is understood as a set of symbols which holds clues for social situations as in this case for the true identity of Amadu and the past choices of Aminata (Good, 1977; Kleinman, 1980). The relationship between healer and patient is often hearty and not dual, but triangular as it includes the family and community (Taussig, 1980). In fact, the case of the ogbanje further verifies those interpretations of African medical systems which argue that the authority over therapeutic decisions roots within the family and kin group (see for example Azevedo et al., 1978; Chavunduka, 1985, Feierman, 1985; Janzen, 1978; Janzen and Feierman, 1979; Janzen and Prins, 1981; Last and Chavunduka, 1986; Richards et el, 2015; Young, 1979). Not Amadu himself, but his family decided how to

treat his attacks and if, when, or whom to consult often without discussing it with Amadu beforehand.

All medical practitioners employed to treat Amadu offered different medicines, prescribed potions and concoctions, executed rituals and requested follow-up sessions with Amadu. And all of the consultants requested a fee for their services. Not only the extended family, but the entire community ended up contributing financially to Amadu's treatment which lasted for months.

Now, three years later, he only very rarely experiences attacks. He is still living with his family in the same community and, although people still treat him with caution, he is accepted by most. However, his case is often recited, both as a warning for wrongdoers and an example for the worth of acceptance and cohesion in the community. On a macro-level, the case of the ogbanjes is indicative of the search for control and security in a post-conflict, post-pandemic urban environment that, while highly impoverished and precarious, is nonetheless full of opportunities and promises of prosperity, from which, for the most part, the residents of slum communities are excluded.

Ogbanjes as donors of significance

In Sierra Leone the discourses of capitalist technology and promises of 'development' collide drastically with the harsh realities of daily life. When stripped of the masquerade of post-conflict recovery propagated by politics, development organisations and media, a dysfunctional healthcare system covers such pledges in the grim realities of all-encompassing precariousness. Sierra Leone's post-conflict, post-Ebola environment is not only the home of the 'agenda for prosperity', but also the site of severe human suffering. Sierra Leoneans have not only endured slavery and colonialism, but also decades of political instability after independence as well as a devastating civil war. The Ebola pandemic tormented the country and its health system further. Pain, death, and loss are frequent companions in many people's lives and only very few have access to adequate medical services. 97% of the urban population is estimated to live in slums (Encyclopaedia of the Nations, NY). Infant and maternal mortality rates remain among the highest in the world with many children dying before the age of five (World Health Organization, NY). In such an environment people are wary of becoming attached to a new-born baby.

Conclusion

In Amadu's case, the explicit negotiations and evaluations taking place in family and community to evaluate the versatile actions that contributed to the present conflict, were accompanied by the tacit negotiations of individuals as they rated their actions and assessed Amadu's behaviour as well as their position towards him. Thus, the rambunctious consultations taking place with regards to possible (re-)actions call for an appreciation of what Mbembe called 'the Cameroonian or African "principle of simultaneous multiplicities"' (Mbembe, 1997: 152 cited in Nyamnjoh, 2001: 29). As we have seen, ogbanjes not only play a distinctive role in people's efforts to understand disease, death, and loss, but also deal with the hurt it causes. Blaming the mother after the painful loss of a child is one option often chosen. However, the mother is not the only culprit that comes into question. In their search for explanatory devices, people also see the ogbanje as the main offender. Ogbanjes are perceived as restless and unable to commit and are characterised as belonging to two demanding and tempting worlds at the same time. By choosing the explanation that the ogbanje, who did not belong in the human world to start with, just went back home, families seek closure and find a way to navigate the painful aftermath of untimely deaths.

The concept of the ogbanje therefore impersonates not only a mechanism to navigate the poor environment and insufficient medical facilities available to the general population in Sierra Leone, but also incorporates the source for culprits as well as coping mechanisms. My respondents negotiate issues of identity and belonging alongside

conceptions of personhood and femininity as they negotiate their positions among their kin and wider society. Similar to Michael Jackson's interpretation of Kuranko shape-shifting my respondents' strategies 'reveal a search for autonomy, meaning, and control in a world that often appears unpredictable and ungraspable.' (2012:112). The concept of the ogbanje is one example of a local phenomenon which highlights regional cosmologies, sheds light on occurring epistemologies, colours hegemonic interpretations of illness and informs actions which inspire, influence, and direct the manoeuvring of resilient Sierra Leoneans through surroundings amalgamated by recurrent crises and instability.

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[i] The names of my respondents have been changed and references to exact locations omitted to protect their privacy.

[ii] My research focused on local perceptions of development and was conducted with youth and young men and women from different slum-dwelling and low-income communities in Freetown who spend their time hustling and chasing after job opportunities. They are from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds and economically poor. Apart from hearing comments and stories in passing, I was not confronted with conceptions of ogbanjes, until I was present at the boat trip during which the initial public attack occurred as well as at the consultations and discussions that followed. After that I conducted in-depths personal interviews and focus group discussions with the people involved, with the community and with healers with different denominations.

[iii] Although there are differences between abikus and ogbanjes (see for example Ilechukwu, 2007) most academics use the terms interchangeably.

[iv] There are various differences between the phenomenon in Sierra Leone and in Nigeria the discussion of which would extend the scope of this paper. A comparative analysis has to be carried out elsewhere.

[v] See Bledsoe (1980) for an analysis of the concept of 'having wealth in people'.