

Bibobra and the Philosophy of Pre-Chosen Destiny in Izon Mythology: A Comparative Study of the Myths of Ogboinba and Ebiere

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This study explores the Izon (Ijaw) philosophical concept of Bibobra—the belief that individuals choose their destiny before birth through a comparative analysis of two myths: Ogboinba and Ebiere. While both narratives center on women grappling with the unfulfilled desire for motherhood, they present divergent responses to fate: one in defiance, the other in acceptance. By examining how each character engages with the consequences of her pre-chosen path, this paper highlights the moral and metaphysical insights encoded in Izon mythology. Drawing upon the works of scholars such as Isidore Okpewho, Sophie Oluwole, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, and Chinwe Achebe, the study situates these myths within the broader discourse of African cosmology, mythic symbolism, and gendered experience. Ultimately, the paper argues that Bibobra not only reflects a unique indigenous epistemology but also offers a nuanced framework for understanding destiny, spiritual agency, and the reconciliation of human longing with metaphysical order in African thought.

Keywords: Bibobra, Myth, Destiny, Ogboinba

INTRODUCTION

Within the rich cosmological framework of the Izon (Ijaw) people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the philosophy of Bibobra stands as a vital interpretive key for understanding the nature of human existence and the spiritual logic underpinning myth and destiny. This philosophy is echoed in Owigiri by musicians such as the late King Robert Ebizimor, Alfred Ezonebi and other Ijaw musicians and in popular names like "Bibobra" and "Enebibobra" which translates roughly into English as "how I chose to come". Central to Bibobra is the belief that each individual selects their life's path—including gender, talents, fortunes, and even the circumstances of death—prior to their birth in the spiritual realm. This pre-natal choice shapes the individual's earthly journey and is not to be questioned or reversed. Through this lens, life is not a random unfolding of events, but a consciously accepted path filled with both blessings and limitations. This paper examines how the philosophy of Bibobra is articulated and dramatized in two significant Izon myths: the creation myth of Ogboinba, a woman who defies the fate she chose before birth, and Ebiere, the woman who accepts her limitations after a tragic loss. While both women struggle with unfulfilled desires—particularly the longing for motherhood—their contrasting responses to fate reveal profound insights into Izon metaphysics, morality, and the nature of spiritual wisdom.

In analyzing these myths, this study draws upon the broader context of African philosophical thought, particularly on destiny and self-determination. Scholars like Sophie Oluwole have emphasized the complexity of African metaphysics in relation to fate and freedom, arguing that African cosmologies often see choice and order as inseparably linked (Oluwole 47). Similarly, Isidore Okpewho highlights the narrative function of myth in conveying communal values and philosophical beliefs (Okpewho 18). The idea that myth is both expressive and didactic is echoed in the works of Henry Louis Gates Jr., who sees African mythological traditions as repositories of moral reasoning and social reflection (Gates 112). Additionally, Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, an authority on Ijaw history and oral traditions, notes that Izon myths often explore the tension between human will and divine order, using mythic figures to embody these conflicts (Alagoa 23). Finally, Chinwe Achebe suggests that the role of the supernatural in African storytelling reflects an enduring engagement with the metaphysical questions of choice, suffering, and spiritual identity (Achebe 35).

By situating the myths of Ogboinba and Ebiere within the Bibobra philosophical framework, this paper not only explores their thematic richness but also contributes to a deeper understanding of Izon epistemology and the enduring relevance

of African indigenous thought.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The philosophical construct of Bibobra, as understood within Izon cosmology, presents a profound worldview wherein human beings are believed to choose their destiny prior to birth. This concept offers an interpretive framework through which myths such as Ogboinba and Ebiere can be critically examined. Okpewho asserts that African myths are not mere tales but structured expressions of cosmological and philosophical worldviews. According to him, myths function as “a medium through which societies preserve their knowledge systems, values, and existential beliefs” (Okpewho 18). This perspective is crucial to understanding how Izon myths, especially that of Ogboinba, reflect deeper truths about spiritual choices and human limitations. Okpewho’s approach supports the interpretation of Bibobra not only as a theological concept but as a moral compass embedded in narrative structure.

The debate surrounding fate and human agency is central to many African philosophical traditions. In *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy* (2014), Sophie Oluwole highlights the Yoruba concept of “ayanmo” (destiny), comparing it with Greek ideas of determinism. Oluwole maintains that African philosophical systems often hold that individuals choose their destiny before birth, a view that closely aligns with Bibobra. She writes, “what a person becomes is not just a matter of earthly action but of pre-mundane decision” (Oluwole 47). This argument helps to ground Bibobra within a wider pan-African metaphysical tradition that upholds both individual choice and spiritual order, allowing for a comparative exploration of Ogboinba’s rejection and Ebiere’s eventual acceptance of their chosen fates.

Turning specifically to the Ijaw context, Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa’s *A History of the Niger Delta: Historical Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition* (1972) offers one of the most authoritative accounts of Izon cosmology, myth, and ancestral beliefs. Alagoa documents how Izon myths articulate complex ideas about identity, spirit, and cosmological origin. He emphasizes that myths like that of Woyengi are not fictional but represent encoded ontological frameworks. “The Ijo understand the world as an interlocking series of decisions and consequences, with the spiritual world deeply entangled in the affairs of the living” (Alagoa 23). His insights help frame Bibobra not as an isolated doctrine but as a central tenet of the Izon metaphysical worldview, especially in the context of life choices and divine hierarchy.

In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Henry Louis Gates Jr. explores how African and African diasporic traditions use myth and folklore to encode symbolic meanings. While his primary focus is African-American literature, Gates’ framework of signification is useful for analyzing how Izon myths, such as Ogboinba’s journey or Ebiere’s encounter with the supernatural old man, layer meaning through metaphor, ritual, and moral confrontation. Gates argues that these stories function not just as reflections of belief but as “acts of philosophical reasoning expressed through narrative symbolism” (Gates 112). This notion provides support for a Bibobra-based reading of the myths as not just stories of fate, but as dramatizations of metaphysical negotiation and reconciliation.

Chinwe Achebe critiques the traditional portrayal of women in African folklore and calls for a closer reading of female mythic figures as agents of spiritual and philosophical meaning. She contends that women characters in myth often carry the symbolic burden of cultural contradictions, especially in areas concerning fertility, power, and moral agency. Her analysis provides a feminist lens for understanding the struggles of Ogboinba and Ebiere—not just as individuals, but as embodiments of larger questions about womanhood and destiny in Izon cosmology (Achebe, 2005). Achebe’s argument strengthens the case that these myths are deeply gendered and that Bibobra, as a philosophical lens, must also be sensitive to the intersection of gender and spiritual determinism.

The existing literature supports a multidimensional reading of Izon myths through the lens of Bibobra. From Okpewho’s structuralist view of myth as a conveyor of metaphysical knowledge, to Oluwole’s and Alagoa’s insights on African fate philosophies, to Gates’ and Achebe’s focus on symbolism and gender, a broad consensus emerges: African myths are epistemological tools. They teach, reflect, and philosophize. In this context, the myths of Ogboinba and Ebiere not only dramatize individual struggles but also reflect a community’s ongoing meditation on the meaning of life, choice, and the sacred authority of destiny. The application of Bibobra allows us to see how myth functions both as cultural memory and philosophical inquiry.

THE PLOT OF *EBIERE* THE WOMAN WHO CAME WITH BEAUTY AND NOT WITH WEALTH

The plot of *Ebiere*, an oral narrative among the Izon speaking people of Sagbama town in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, centers on Ebiere, a woman whose physical beauty and wealth mark her as a figure of admiration and envy in the village of Sonoma Toru. From the beginning, the narrative establishes Ebiere as a woman who once held the attention of powerful men, renowned for her captivating dance during the maiden festival. However, the exposition almost immediately reveals the central conflict: Ebiere is unable to have children, a reality that undermines her societal value in a culture where having children is a defining marker of womanhood and fulfillment. Her infertility leads to the dissolution of two marriages, and though she enjoys material wealth and social standing, she remains emotionally unfulfilled, ostracized by her fellow women, and subjected to their ridicule.

The rising action intensifies as Ebiere, who was now married to her third husband Tonye, witnesses the joys of

Motherhood through his second wife, Ebiare, whom she had encouraged him to marry. Despite her beauty and wealth, Ebiere is plagued by the absence of a child, a void that no material possession, beauty or dance can fill. Driven by desperation, she turns to the clan shrine and makes a sacred vow, offering traditional sacrifices in exchange for a child. This act of spiritual supplication marks a turning point in the narrative. Ebiere conceives shortly afterward, and her pregnancy becomes a source of awe and gossip in the community. The birth of her son, Perezilagha, whose name signifies the supremacy of children over wealth, is received with communal jubilation, presenting Ebiere with the complete life she had always desired—beauty, wealth, and motherhood.

Her son - Perezilagha makes her an object of envy in the village. He grew up strong and healthy but one day when he was seven years old. He falls down and dies. The villages caught by the death of the boy and psychological impact it will have on Ebiere are scared to inform her. She is eventually told.

The tale's emotional intensity deepens as Ebiere, unable to process the tragedy of her son's death, wanders into the evil forest where her son has been buried, seeking succour. In this moment of physical exhaustion and spiritual confusion, she encounters a supernatural figure—an old man who reveals to her the metaphysical truth about her son- the painful truth that he is a spirit child. Through visions conjured by a magical mirror, Ebiere learns that her son was a "spirit child," one who had entered the world temporarily, as a response to spiritual covenants, only to return to the spirit realm after a predetermined time. She also learns of her predetermined fate, how she had rejected children and decided to sail to this world with beauty and wealth.

The resolution of the story is marked by Ebiere's transformation. Ebiere, the protagonist no longer the woman consumed by grief for her son's death or defined by her craving for a child, returns to her home in dignified silence. She adorns herself in her finest attire and prepares a meal for her husband. Later, in the presence of both her and her husband's kinsmen, she narrates her experience in with beauty and wealth, not with a child. This declaration underscores a key theme in the narrative—the impossibility of possessing all that one wants.

The story concludes with the community's reflection on Ebiere's revelation, thus giving the plot a cyclical structure that reinforces its philosophical underpinning. The villagers, who once gossiped, envied and judged her, are now left to debate within themselves the conspicuous truth that life offers gifts selectively, and that every human experience carries its own share of joy and sorrow. The plot of the narrative, progresses from desire to fulfillment and then to loss, and finally to acceptance of her predetermined fate—encapsulating a narrative arc that is as emotional as it is metaphysical. The story, through its structure and unfolding events, ultimately affirms a worldview deeply rooted in African spiritual philosophy: life is a thread woven with both beauty and sorrow, and true peace lies in accepting what is, rather than mourning what is not

THE PLOT OF OGBOINBA

The plot of Ogboinba the Ijaw creation story retold by Gabriel Okara in *Journey to the Presence of Woyengi* centers around Woyengi, the Great Mother and divine creator, and Ogboinba, a powerful woman who seeks to alter her destiny (Okara, 22). The narrative begins with Woyengi's descent from the sky, where she molds humans from earth and grants them the unique opportunity to choose their gender, the kind of life they wish to live, and the manner of their death. Among the newly created humans are two women—one chooses to have children and fame, while the other, Ogboinba, chooses unmatched mystical power. As the years pass, Ogboinba becomes a renowned healer and prophetess, but she grows dissatisfied with her life due to her inability to conceive a child. Determined to change her fate, she embarks on a perilous journey to confront Woyengi, defying divine order. Along her path, Ogboinba encounters and defeats several powerful beings, including forest and sea kings, accumulating their powers as she presses on toward the divine realm. Eventually, she reaches Woyengi's domain and challenges the creator to a contest of power. However, Woyengi effortlessly strips Ogboinba of all her acquired powers, as they ultimately originated from her. Ogboinba flees in fear and hides within the eyes of a pregnant woman, and Woyengi, honoring her own law against harming pregnant women, spares her. The myth concludes with the belief that Ogboinba now resides in the eyes of all humans, symbolizing the enduring presence of spiritual consciousness and the limits of human defiance against divine will. The story is both a creation myth and a moral tale about the boundaries of power, the sanctity of destiny, and the spiritual depth of human experience.

However, the climax of the narrative arrives with sudden tragedy. When Perezilagha is seven years old, he dies unexpectedly while playing with his peers. This event disrupts the illusion of completeness that Ebiere had attained. The narrative's emotional intensity deepens as Ebiere, unable to process the magnitude of her loss, wanders into the evil forest where her son has been buried, seeking closure. In this moment of spiritual despair, she encounters a supernatural figure—an old man who reveals to her the metaphysical truth about her son. Through visions conjured by a magical mirror, Ebiere learns that her son was a "spirit child," one who enters the world temporarily, often in response to spiritual covenants, only to return to the spirit realm after a predetermined time. This encounter reframes the entire narrative and confronts Ebiere—and by extension, the reader—with the limitations of human desire and the complexity of divine will.

Situating the Ogboinba and Ebiere in Bibora metaphysics

The myths of Ogboinba and Ebiere when mirrored through the lens of Bibobra, a philosophy rooted in Ijaw (Izon)

cosmology, reveals a deeper understanding of destiny, choice, and the human condition. At the core of Bibobra is the belief that every human being chooses their fate before birth—that one's life path, including blessings and burdens, is voluntarily accepted in the pre-birth spiritual realm. This principle is foundational in both myths, and it serves as a critical interpretive key for understanding the actions and eventual outcomes of the protagonists.

In the Ogboinba myth, the philosophy of Bibobra is explicitly dramatized. Woyengi, the divine creator, gives each newly created human the power to choose their gender, the kind of life they want to live, and the manner of their death. Ogboinba, fully aware of the options, chooses power over family, prioritizing mystical abilities over the joys and responsibilities of motherhood. Her later dissatisfaction with this choice and her decision to challenge the divine order reflect not just defiance but a fundamental misunderstanding—or refusal—of Bibobra's tenet: that one must live with the fate they selected. Ogboinba's eventual failure, her loss of power, and her retreat into hiding affirm Bibobra's moral framework—that any attempt to overturn a pre-chosen destiny is not only futile but spiritually disruptive. The myth serves as a cautionary tale against resisting the path one has consciously chosen before birth.

Similarly, Ebieri's story, while less overtly metaphysical in its telling, still aligns with Bibobra's central premise. Ebieri is born into beauty and wealth—gifts that she likely selected before birth—but she lacks the ability to bear children, a condition that causes her deep sorrow in a culture that values motherhood. Her spiritual appeal to the clan shrine, rather than an outright rejection of her fate, represents a kind of negotiation rather than rebellion. Her vow and sacrifices acknowledge the spiritual order, and her eventual conception can be interpreted not as a change of destiny, but as the fulfillment of a path that had not yet reached its appointed time. Her child, named Perezilagha (meaning "children are greater than wealth"), reflects a reevaluation of her values rather than a reversal of her fate. Unlike Ogboinba, Ebieri's journey suggests that patience, humility, and reverence for spiritual processes can lead to a deeper fulfillment within the bounds of one's pre-chosen destiny.

CONCLUSION

In both myths, Bibobra provides the philosophical lens through which individual suffering, desire, and fulfillment are understood. Humans, in this worldview, are not victims of an arbitrary fate but agents of their own spiritual design. Life on earth, with all its joys and trials, is a reflection of choices made in the spiritual realm before birth. These stories therefore do not merely entertain or moralize—they reaffirm a distinctly Ijaw belief in the sacredness of personal destiny and the wisdom of accepting life as it unfolds. Through this lens, destiny is not a prison, but a path freely chosen, and peace comes not from changing it, but from walking it with understanding and acceptance.

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