

Decolonising Queer Sexualities: A Critical Reading of the *Ogbanje* Concept in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018)

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Abstract: In some African societies, there is a perception that queer sexualities are an invention of Western modernity and that they do not have a place in indigenous ways of being human. Oftentimes, such perceptions draw on anti-colonial discourses and nationalistic rhetoric that essentialize Africa as a different geographical space that does not share the cultural practices and ontological inclinations of the West. In this article, we appropriate Stuart Hall's ideas on the fluidity of cultural identity, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, and Maria Lugones's notion of the coloniality of gender to analyze the representation of sexuality and queer identities in Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018). *Freshwater* deploys the concept of the *ogbanje* (spirit child) in Igbo culture to problematize not only the idea of being human in Igbo cosmology, but also to foreground the fluidity and social constructedness of identities in general and sexual identities in particular. The protagonist of the novel, Ada is a part-human part-spirit being that lives in-between two worlds—the human and the spiritual. As an *ogbanje*, she is inhabited by (and thus lives as), different spirit beings that manifest different sexual orientations in her body. The article has two objectives. Firstly, to explore how Emezi deploys the *ogbanje* concept to delineate the complexity of Igbo ontologies in relation to sexuality. Secondly, to investigate how *Freshwater* uses the *ogbanje* as a framework to locate queer identities and sexualities in African cosmologies. We argue that Emezi's novel does not only locate queer identities within African cosmologies but also debunks culturally sanctioned misconceptions that portray queer sexualities as both inhuman and abnormal.

Keywords: sexuality, queerness, Igbo cosmology, spirit being, identity

Introduction

In her critically acclaimed novel, *Beloved*, American novelist Toni Morrison wrote that “definitions belong to the definer; not the defined.”¹ These words do not only allude to the power of discourse in the constitution of identities but also the agentic power of self-naming outside the confines of established categories. Our reading of Emezi's *Freshwater* draws inspiration from theoretical concepts that speak to the fluidity, multiplicity, and social constructed-ness of identities. We argue that the preoccupation with binaries in the construction of identities constrains and limits the possibilities of human expression. In *Freshwater*, Emezi

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engages not only the multiplicity and social constructedness of identities but also the complexity of the notion of being human itself. In an interview following the publication of her novel, Emezi stated that she wrote *Freshwater* to provide an alternative explanation to “being,” hence the novel is dedicated to “those of us with one foot on the other side.”² The idea of having “one foot on the other side” does not only seek to acknowledge “other” ways of being woman/human but also the complexity of human identities in general.

Freshwater delineates the complexity of “being” through the concept of the *ogbanje*, which originates from Nigerian (Igbo) mythology where it refers to reincarnate, devious spirits that take the form of humans and live as embodied spirits although they never cut ties with the spiritual world. We are aware that the *ogbanje* is also part of Yoruba spirituality (where it is known as *abiku*); however, for the purposes of this analysis, we locate the *ogbanje* within the Nigerian Igbo tradition. As a symbol of the complexities of being human within Igbo culture and spirituality, the *ogbanje* problematizes gender by harmonizing the spiritual (genderless) and the embodied (gendered) spheres of being human. In Igbo culture, the term *ogbanje* refers to children who retain their spiritual connection after they have been born to their biological parents. The concept is located in a cultural worldview that perceives the natural physical world as interconnected with the spiritual world. In Igbo cosmology, *ogbanje* children die at a very young age only to be born again to the same family at different time.³ It is also believed an *ogbanje* carries a charm into the physical world that keeps it connected to the spiritual world where it comes from. Upon birth to its human parents, it hides the charm in a secret place, and the only way to break the cycle of death and rebirth is to find the charm and destroy it, thus severing its connection to the spiritual world.⁴ Like most African societies, the Igbo believe in reincarnation whereby those who die become ancestors and continue to guide and influence the living. In this cosmology, the *ogbanje* becomes an unwelcome deviation that lives in between two different worlds.

Emezi is not the first author to appropriate the *ogbanje* as a conceptual prism to articulate the complexity of the notion of “being” in Igbo society in particular and Nigerian society in general. In his seminal novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe invokes the *ogbanje* to demonstrate the complexity of African cosmologies of the precolonial era.⁵ Ezinma, Okonkwo’s daughter with his second wife, Ekwefi, is an *ogbanje*, who, ironically, embodies qualities that Okonkwo admires. Contrary to Igbo tradition, Okonkwo develops a strong bond with Ezinma. Okonkwo’s behavior deviates from Igbo tradition, which perceives *ogbanje* children as temporary beings. Developing a strong bond with *ogbanjes* will only cause pain because they eventually die and return to the spirit world. In Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, the protagonist Azaro is an *abiku/ogbanje* child who chooses to stay with his biological parents instead of returning to the spirit world. However, given his spiritual ancestry, Azaro is troublesome and often wanders and attracts trouble. As a being located in two worlds, Azaro is both fascinated and repulsed by the human suffering that emerges from the political climate in Nigeria. Okri does not only represent the *abiku* as an embodiment of an alternative ontology but also appropriates and deploys it as a critical lense to examine the Nigerian political landscape.⁶

Emezi joins the conversation by appropriating the *ogbanje* as a framework to interrogate Igbo cosmology in relation to queer identities. Although Emezi acknowledges Achebe’s and Okri’s use of the *ogbanje* to frame the complexities of Igbo culture and spirituality, she moves on to deploy the concept as a metaphor of multiple identities and notions of being.⁷ This study adopts the concept of the *ogbanje* as an entry point to interrogate the complexity of the Igbo

cosmology in relation to gender and sexuality. We are particularly interested in examining Igbo spirituality and worldviews in relation to gender and queer sexuality as portrayed in Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018). We investigate how the ogbanje concept, as deployed in Emezi's novel, elucidates notions of being, gender, and sexuality in the context of negative perceptions often held against queerness and other ways of being in some African cultures.

Theoretical Underpinnings

We appropriate Stuart Hall's ideas on the fluidity of cultural identity, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, and Maria Lugones's notion of the coloniality of gender to analyze the representation of sexuality and queer identities in Emezi's *Freshwater*. These theoretical concepts allow for a nuanced analysis of sexuality, gender and identity. In fact, the point of convergence among these three theories is the recognition that identities are not necessarily fixed or static. We see similarities between Stuart Hall's view of identity as fluid, always in a state of flux, with Butler's idea of gender as a performance. If gender is a cultural construct as Butler argues, it means that it is not static and that it can change as culture changes. Stuart Hall argues that "identities are never unified [but] fragmented and fractured" which implies that they are always in a state of transformation.⁸ For Hall, identity is constructed within specific historical sites and "discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies."⁹ Identity is never settled but always in a state of flux. This view of identity is relevant to this analysis because it accommodates "other" identities and ways of being often perceived as abnormal in some cultural contexts.

Judith Butler conceptualises gendered identities as social constructs and performances.¹⁰ In Butler's view, "identity is tenuously constituted in time...instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."¹¹ Over time, the stylized repeated acts become performative accomplishments which the mundane audience start to internalize and believe. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that within Western culture sex, gender, and sexual orientation are viewed as closely linked, essential qualities.¹² Yet gender is a social construct which is open to negotiation through performance. Given that society tends to normalise heterosexuality as natural individuals who fail to perform heterosexuality are punished, stigmatized, and marginalized. Heteronormative societies police sexuality in an attempt to reproduce and sustain a system of compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality is the "cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions."¹³ Both Hall and Butler foreground the view that identities are not given but constructed socially. The question that we tease out in this article is how Igbo cultural cosmologies accommodate difference and/or other ways of being through the idea of the ogbanje.

In her book *The Invention of Women*, Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that "the ascription of gender to biological features and the creation of binaries is a Western concept."¹⁴ Similarly, Maria Lugones argues that the colonial system distorted African ways of conceptualising gender and sexuality. In order to free notions of gender, sex, and sexuality from the shackles of the colonial episteme, it is important to "move the centre" by acknowledging Africa as a legitimate epistemic centre with its own cosmologies and ways of being. Lugones argues that central to colonial modernity is the "dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human."¹⁵ Colonialism constructed colonized peoples as subhuman so as to justify conquest. Alongside physical colonization and material dispossession, the colonial project introduced

“dichotomous hierarchical distinctions [...] between men and women” and these distinctions “became woven into the historicity of relations, including intimate relations.”¹⁶

Lugones further asserts that Western culture (particularly British culture) imposed a binary gender system upon the world through colonization. Under this system, the bourgeois white European was deemed civilized and fully human while the colonized “other” was damned as non-human. Western culture became a vehicle for the civilizing mission which was necessary for ideological conquest. Embedded in this Western framework of gender is biological dimorphism characterised by categories of men/women and, most importantly, women were defined by their subordinate relation to men. Coloniality of gender seeks to provide a structure for the identity construction and understanding of non-Western women. It deconstructs Western conceptualizations of gender and attempts to recover indigenous ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. We appropriate Lugones’ coloniality of gender to argue that the *ogbanje* concept within Igbo cosmology has room to accommodate difference and/or alternative identities/sexualities.

Complexity of the Notion of Being in the Igbo Context

In *Freshwater*, the concept of the *ogbanje* serves as narrative trope that articulates the complexity of identity in Igbo society. As a narrative framework, the *ogbanje* embodies the plurality and multiplicity of ontology, identity, and sexuality. Emezi uses the concept to frame thematic concerns of the text, namely the complexity of being in Igbo society and the location of queer desires and identities within Igbo cultural frameworks. The *ogbanje* is a transgressive and disruptive spirit that embodies the essence of liminal existence and the shiftiness of identity. Through *Freshwater*, Emezi challenges binary frameworks that seek to box sexuality into fixed categories. By embracing alternative and non-conventional ways of being (human/woman), Emezi engages in what Mignolo calls “epistemic disobedience” that seeks to decentre the Western episteme and locate gendered ‘otherness’ within cultural and spiritual worldviews of the Igbo.¹⁷

Emezi problematizes identity not only through the Ada’s ontological duality but also through her gender flexibility and malleability. As an *ogbanje*, the Ada embodies different (and sometimes conflicting) sexual orientations, emotions, and ways of being. In fact, the name “the Ada” designates her compound identity. She is many-in-one. Given her unique identity, society perceives and labels her as mentally disturbed. Emezi’s depiction of the Ada does not only delineate the complexity of being in Igbo cosmology but also subverts essentialist notions of gender and sexuality. In appropriating the *ogbanje* as a narrative framework, Emezi evinces a radical philosophy that highlights the limitations of fixed identity categories. By embracing an Afrocentric cultural and spiritual framework located in an Igbo cosmology, Emezi rejects a humanism that excludes “others” such as gays and lesbians from the sphere of humanity and re-inserts queerness into Igbo culture and spirituality. *Freshwater* is a ground-breaking text not only because of its multi-voiced narrative form but also because of its thematic concerns. It “offer[s] new forms of subjectivity, new ways of existing [and] defining our species and belonging within the material world.”¹⁸ We read *Freshwater* as a decolonial text that re-locates and re-centers “otherness” within the cultural practices and spiritual beliefs of the Igbo.

Through the Ada, a character who embodies otherness and difference, Emezi dismantles not only the myth that queerness is ‘unAfrican’ but also prevailing Eurocentric dualisms that box humanity into fixed categories (sexual, cultural, economic, etc.). Although the Ada is an

embodied being, she also hosts numerous godly spirits within her—Asughara, St. Vincent and Yshwa, to name a few. The name “the Ada” as opposed to “Ada” encapsulates her identity as a human with a spiritual connection and a spirit with a human connection. To call her “the Ada” is to acknowledge her borderline existence as “another” way of being human. The Ada is characterised as the daughter of Ala, a god that manifests in the form of a python. She is partly a god and partly a human. She, in a sense, exemplifies the Christian idea of the trinity, yet with much more freedom to express herself in the different forms of her being.

In Igbo cosmology, the human world is three-dimensional: the sky, the earth intricately woven with water, and the spirit/ancestral world.¹⁹ Each of these three dimensions operate in an “interconnected, contiguous, continuous and non-hierarchical manner.”²⁰ The Igbo believe that a holistic relationship exists between all ecosystems. Unlike the Christian idea of the trinity, which is hierarchical—Father, Son, Spirit—Igbo cosmology recognizes the interdependence and interconnectedness of the different forms of existence. Consequently, the Igbo believe that to maintain peace and harmony in the community, humans have a responsibility to develop a sustainable relationship with their environment.²¹ In this worldview, female deities control agricultural resources such as land, rivers, hills, forests, and caves. The Ada’s association with the animal world speaks to the interconnectedness and interdependence of the human and the non-human worlds in Igbo cosmology. The Ada is thus a hybrid being that embodies three realms of life: the human, the spiritual, and the animal worlds. She is “the” Ada because she is not just one being but many-beings-in-one. The use of a definite article “the” is an active attempt to foreground her compound identity. Oftentimes, we tend to identify humanity through gender, whether one is male or female. Emezi disrupts this dualism by imagining an alternative world order where there is neither male or female. The Ada is not only a product of human intercourse but also a child of the gods, the flesh of Ala.²²

Emezi situates queer identities within Igbo cosmology by establishing a connection between the notion of the *ogbanje* and queerness. The Ada, just like the *ogbanje*, is an ‘other’ being whose life and sexuality challenges existing norms. Emezi pushes the idea that humans are both natural and spiritual beings to the limits by suggesting that it is possible to live both a genderless (spiritual) and gendered (natural) life. The Ada’s parents are mere vessels chosen to fulfil a supernatural design; hence they do not have total control over the Ada’s identity. The Ada does not exist for the first time when she is born to her parents because in Igbo cosmology, worldly existence is the continuation of a life that begins in the spiritual realm. The Igbo believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, *Chukwa* or *Chineke*, who lives in the Sky with other divinities such as Lightning, Thunder, Sun, and Moon.²³ The Igbo consider the Supreme Being the highest divinity, the Creator of Earth. According to the Igbo view of the universe, there are spirits/deities on Earth who are manifestations of the Supreme Being.²⁴ The activities of the various categories of spirits, as well as the happenings in other realms of the universe are meaningful because they relate to human life and the general welfare of humankind.²⁵ In fact, Igbo cosmology regards the human world as “an alive or dynamic universe that humans share with a host of malevolent human spirits.”²⁶

In light of this, Igbo cosmology recognizes that life on earth is both physical and spiritual.²⁷ Although the two worlds are separate, Igbo cosmology recognizes a dual interaction between the inhabitants of the two worlds such that the activities of spiritual beings/forces often directly influence the affairs of the human world.²⁸ This interaction between the physical and the

spiritual is evident in *Freshwater* in that the Ada has siblings both in the natural and spiritual worlds. In Western philosophy (for example, Sartre's existentialism), a human being is an independent agent who has power to determine his/her own destiny. In fact, existentialist philosophy claims that Man makes himself, thus suggesting that humans are independent beings. In Igbo cosmology, however, the fate of humanity is not solely in the hands of a man/woman because the physical intricately intertwines with the spiritual. In *Freshwater*, the gods choose Saul to be Ada's father because they know that "he will give her the correct name."²⁹ When Saul names his daughter Ada, he does not realize that he is fulfilling the desires of the gods. As the Ada navigates her journey of self-discovery, a historian informs her that her name "has many connotations" thus hinting at her non-normative gender and sexuality.³⁰

The Ada grows up ignorant of her spiritual parentage because her Westernized family does not believe in Igbo spirituality. This explains why she screams the first time she sees her spiritual mother, Ala (the snake). What her human parents do not understand (perhaps because of their European education) is that the Ada is embodiment of different ways of being. She is a human, a snake, and a spirit. The Ada's attitude towards the snake, her mother, metaphorically represents the way in which Westernized Africans have been culturally and spiritually dislocated. In the same way that the colonized abandoned their cultural practices for the trinkets of Western culture, Ada also abandons her spiritual ancestry for the temporary comfort of her human family. Emezi uses the Ada's fear of the python to illustrate the epistemic erasure that the colonial enterprise brought upon African communities. Metaphorically, the Ada has been colonized and brainwashed through association with humans. The narrator states, "...before a christ-induced amnesia struck the humans, it was well known that the python was sacred, beyond reptile [...] the flesh of the god Ala [...] the mother [...] it was taboo to kill her [...] for the egg of a python is the child of Ala[...]."³¹ In this passage, Emezi highlights the epistemic death that Igbo communities suffered as a result of colonialism. The "christ-induced amnesia" refers to the uptake of Western religious practices which mediate the erasure of indigenous religious and cultural practices. Forgetting the sacredness of the snake is likely to result in irresponsible behaviour towards it. Saul (the Ada's father) kills the snake because he has no memory of either its spiritual significance or its relationship with his daughter. The way he treats the snake suggests that the Ada's human family has completely cut ties with Igbo spirituality. When the snake first appears, we are told that the spirits scream in fear, the Ada stares frozen in horror, and Saul kills it violently with a machete.³² As a Westernized man, Saul is unaware of the severity of his action "he had no idea what he had done."³³ Metaphorically, Saul is a blind man because he cannot see the "other" world where his daughter belongs.

In light of the above, the title "freshwater" implies a new/"fresh" cultural and spiritual framework that recognizes and re-centres marginalised ontologies and sexual identities.³⁴ In Igbo cosmology, a python (the Ada) is considered a sacred creature, a giver of life and an incarnation of the water god, Ala.³⁵ Like "all water [which] is connected," all beings are also connected despite their differences.³⁶ Through the Ada's assertive and "disobedient" personality, Emezi makes a statement about the power of "coming out" from the closet of culturally imposed limitations. The Ada gains personal freedom by accepting her ogbanje identity and exploring the world through her spiritual and non-spiritual forms. She becomes a symbol of "freshness" because she embodies different sexual orientations and new ways of being in one's body.

Emezi is not the first author to address the effects of cultural colonialism on indigenous knowledge systems, religious practices and ways of being. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a Christian missionary kills a python to demonstrate the power of the Christian faith over African religious beliefs. Consequently, he falls sick and dies under mysterious circumstances. The incident vindicated local people who had warned the missionary about the sacred status of the python. Similarly, in *The Famished Road* Ben Okri uses snakes to portray how ogbanjes are compound beings connected to other life forms.³⁷ Ben Okri's protagonist Azaro is haunted by images of snakes that he sees everywhere he goes—snakes in the woods, at school, at Madame Koto's bar, and sometimes the road splits into bodies of snakes. In *Things Fall Apart*, the missionary who kills the python does not necessarily die because of the sacred status ascribed to it in Igbo cosmology but also because his action disrupts the ecological balance at the centre of Igbo spirituality.

Emezi uses the ogbanje concept to show that human life is interconnected with, and depends on, the existence of other lives in the universe. The constant battle and misunderstanding between the Ada and the spirits often leads to misfortunes and accidents in the Ada's life. In Igbo culture, human beings are not born free as the architects of Western existentialist philosophy such as Nietzsche and Sartre claim. African philosophers such as Wiredu have argued that in African culture, a human being is born into obligations ascribed by society.³⁸ Similarly, in Igbo philosophy, *chi* is a "unique personal life-force...that determines each individual's destiny."³⁹ It gives each person the possibility to realize himself in the community. As a result, it is important for individuals to maintain a harmonious relationship with their chi. The Igbo understand the chi as "the explanatory principle for successes or failures in life" which manifests in two forms, the material and the immaterial.⁴⁰ The material part stands for the body (visible) while the immaterial part consists of the mind and the soul (invisible). The immaterial part of the chi is the defining principle of man's personhood because it forms relationships with the transcendental world. For example, one of the biggest fears amongst the Igbo is to die and be thrown into the Evil Forest. In *Things Fall Apart*, people who commit grave moral sins are banished to the Evil Forest where they eventually die unattended. Dying in the Evil Forest is a catastrophic fate in Igbo spirituality because it means a person receives no burial rites. The Igbo believe that a person who has not received a legitimate and appropriate burial will not join the ancestors. Thus, in Igbo cosmology, the societal obligations in this lifetime determine one's position on the other side of life.

The spirits that inhabit the Ada often express disgust at human ways, particularly the rigid, narrowminded nature of humans. The spirits condescendingly state that "...they don't care what happens to flesh, mostly because it is so slow and boring."⁴¹ Human arrogance, as reflected through Saul's behaviour towards the gods, shows that humans are ignorant of their own powerlessness in relation to the gods. Although the spiritual and human worlds are interdependent, Emezi suggests that the spiritual world is superior to the natural world. The Ada lives in the natural world, has natural parents but her permanent home is spiritual. Embodiment is thus a complex phenomenon that requires the Ada to live between two worlds without disrupting the balance or prioritising one over the other. The Ada is a god "stuffed into a bag of skin."⁴² The word "stuffed" conjures up images of a restraining and restrictive existence. The implication is that embodiment is limiting because it subjects the body to the

limitations of gender and sexuality. The blurred boundaries between the human/non-human in the ogbanje identity allows for an “other” way of being.

Emezi advocates multiple ways of being human/woman through the text’s fragmented narrative style. The story is narrated by multiple voices, namely: the collective spirits within Ada (who identify as “we”); Asughara (the Ada’s spiritual protector); and Ada (the human component). The fragmented, multiple-voice narrative style is a technique that portrays the complex, non-conforming, and multiplicitous nature of being human. The novel has twenty-three chapters but the human Ada only narrates three chapters (nine, nineteen and twenty-two). Most of the story is told through Ada’s spiritual double “Asughara” who takes up the plural identity “we.” The collective spirits narrate eleven out of the twenty-three chapters. The multiple spiritual-selves constitute a compound identity that takes the embodied form of the Ada. The Ada’s minimal and short appearance in the text is an expression of the limited influence of human life in a universe filled with other non-human beings. In fact, through the Ada’s ephemeral life, Emezi suggests that in Igbo cosmology, humans are not necessarily the centre of the universe. Okri makes the same point through Azaro’s relationship with humans. Azaro is often fascinated by human norms, “the fact that they were alive [...] contained [...] in their flesh seemed incredible.”⁴³ The idea of being “contained” suggests lack of freedom that comes with embodiment and ascribing to particular cultures and identities. Both Okri and Emezi portray ogbanjes as non-conformist beings who transcend the limitations of culturally prescribed identities. In *Freshwater*, the Ada refuses to live within to confines of gender and sexuality.

As an ogbanje, the Ada’s spiritual identity allows her to overcome the limitations of embodiment. In Igbo cosmology, an ogbanje is a spirit-child that carries within itself the power of both life and death. The Igbo believe that ogbanje children are attached to an *iyi-uwa* or a physical object that they bring into the material world to maintain a connection with the spiritual world. The *iyi-uwa* is a physical manifestation of the ogbanje’s promise to return to the spirit world.⁴⁴ To sever the ogbanje’s ties with the spiritual world, the *iyi-uwa* must be found and destroyed. In *Freshwater*, Emezi describes the *iyi-uwa* as “a pact” that manifests in the form of “bits of bone, an igneous rock, worn-out velveteen, a strip of human hide tying it all together... [a]compound object ...the oath of the world...a bridge... the way back.”⁴⁵ The *iyi-uwa* is a “bridge” and a “way back” because it connects the ogbanje with the spiritual realm.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s daughter, Ezinma, leads Okagbue, the medicine man, to her *iyi-uwa*, buried near an orange tree.⁴⁶ However, in *Freshwater* the *iyi-uwa* is inside the host, the Ada, “in the pit of her stomach, between the mucus lining and the muscle layer” making it difficult to sever her spiritual connection.⁴⁷ The inseparable connection between the Ada and the *iyi-uwa* signifies the intricate connection between gender and sexuality. The Ada’s *iyi-uwa* cannot be destroyed without destroying the host. Furthermore, the spirits claim that the day they died was the day they were born to suggest that the Ada embodies both life and death.⁴⁸ For the spirits, as it is for the Ada, death is a form of birth because it signifies entry into a new life. Thus, the *iyi-uwa* embodies the ogbanje’s ambiguous relationship with life and death. In order for the Ada to live, the *iyi-uwa* too must live which means that the tie to the spirit world must remain unsevered for the Ada to survive. We read the Ada’s intricate relationship with the *iyi-uwa*, buried in the pit of her stomach, as a metaphoric representation of queer identities in a heteronormative society. Queerness is not like a demon that one can exorcise to free the demon-

possessed. It is another way of being in the same way that the Ada and her iyi-uwa are one inseparable being.

True to her multiple forms and ways of being, the Ada inhabits (and is inhabited by) different identities and sexualities. The spirits state that “when the transition is made from spirit to flesh, the gates are meant to be closed.”⁴⁹ However, the ogbanje is “abnormal” in that he/she continues to interact with the spiritual world after transitioning to the human world. As spirits, ogbanjes are not restricted by issues of sexual fidelity because they are capable of inhabiting different genders at different times.

In a heteronormative world, a man/woman is expected to harbour certain emotions that identify with a predetermined sexual category. The Ada transcends and transgresses “natural” emotions to embrace emotions often associated with different genders. In this way, the ogbanje becomes symbolic of a “third space” where differences co-exist without conflict. Unlike other humans who are born once, the Ada is unique because she has multiple births. The first birth is when the spirits are placed within her.⁵⁰ This symbolises the merging of the spiritual and physical worlds. The second birth is when the spirits awaken in her body and she gives them names, Smoke and Shadow.⁵¹ This second birth establishes a connection between the two realms. The third birth occurs when Asughara is born as Ada’s weapon against violence—a spirit protector.⁵² This birth represents the interaction between the spiritual and material worlds because Asughara often steps in when Ada’s life is in jeopardy. The multiple births do not only encapsulate the ogbanje’s transgressive nature but also the view that humans are embodied spirits.

The Ogbanje as a Metaphor of Queer Sexualities

Emezi does not only appropriate the *ogbanje* to challenge entrenched Western cultural frameworks, but also to frame and locate queer identities in African cosmology. As highlighted before, the dynamism and fluidity of the ogbanje suggests that Igbo cosmology has space for alternative ontologies and sexual identities. In most African societies, queer identities are alienated, marginalized, and labelled as foreign and “unAfrican.”⁵³ In recent decades, queer and feminist scholars have dismissed the view that queerness is ‘unAfrican’ as a myth that has its roots in the colonial enterprise. Through *Freshwater*, a title that metaphorically challenges the stale water of Western epistemology, Emezi joins other feminist scholars in efforts to “legitimize” queer identities within the African context. By seeking to locate queer identities and desires in Igbo culture, Emezi not only disrupts Western myths entrenched by colonialism but also addresses the issue of a reified African culture.

Scholars such as Tamale, Nyanzi, and Ratele argue that culture is a construct which occurs within a historical context.⁵⁴ Nyanzi argues that discourses that reify African culture are rooted in colonial law, biomedicine, and Christianity.⁵⁵ Tamale on the other hand, posits that what is often understood as African culture is “largely a product of constructions and reinterpretations by former colonial authorities in collaboration with African male patriarchs.”⁵⁶ The view that queer identities are ‘unAfrican’ operates on the assumption that there is a ‘pure’ African culture untouched by colonialism and Western culture. As mentioned earlier, scholars such as Amadiume and Lugones advance the view that one of the effects of the imposition of Western culture on Africa is a gender system that is binary and biomorphic.⁵⁷ In *Freshwater*, Emezi uses

the ogbanje concept to deconstruct these rigid notions of gender and thus, locate alternative sexualities within Igbo cosmology.

The text is stylistically structured in a way that resonates with the freedom and subjectivity that comes with accepting and embracing one's preferred gender and sexual identity. Structurally, *Freshwater* mimicks the experiences of the Ada as an ogbanje—a human-spirit who embodies multiple identities and ways of being. Emezi equates queerness to the ogbanje identity in Igbo society because, like the ogbanjes, who are often perceived as agents of social discord, queer people also experience various forms of discrimination in some African societies. We read the ogbanje as an alternative identity and way of being located within Igbo spirituality. As an ogbanje wo/man, the Ada is a 'neutral' being that transcends the limitations of gender and sexuality.⁵⁸ She is neither male nor female because her body harbors bisexual emotions. Scholars such as Butler have argued that gender comes into being performatively as opposed to naturally.⁵⁹ Emezi uses the ogbanje concept to demonstrate the performativity of gender and the role of culture and socialization in the constitution of gender. The Ada is transgender because she is like "a trickster" {who} "could move between boy and girl..."⁶⁰ As Butler argues, gender is neither something fixed nor something innate. It is brought into existence "by repetition of acts."⁶¹

The Ada's liminal existence corroborates Oyewumi's sentiment that gender systems and binaries, especially those which are linked to sex, are a colonial legacy.⁶² Oyewumi argues that in Western culture, gender is an organizing principle that places (and universalises the place of) woman in the patriarchal nuclear family.⁶³ However, in Yoruba society, family organisation is different because it is non-gendered and kinship roles and categories are not gender-differentiated.⁶⁴ The fundamental organizing principle in the Yoruba family is not gender but seniority. Amadiume's book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* traces the history of Nigerian societies from the precolonial to the postcolonial era and convincingly argues that gendered societies in Africa were birthed by colonialism.⁶⁵ The organizing principle in these societies was capital and industriousness, not gender.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Dlamini asserts that the homophobic sentiments often paraded as "African culture" are results of "Eurocentric ideas and worldviews which were imposed on diverse Black cultures."⁶⁷

Since the ogbanje is not limited by embodiment, it oscillates between desires and Emezi appropriates this idea to authorise queer desires in a largely heteronormative Igbo society. The Ada's compound identity corroborates Hall's view that "identity lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity."⁶⁸ As a spirit/human being, the Ada lives as and through different spirits with different desires that must be satisfied. In many instances, the human Ada is sexually neutral because she has taken a vow of celibacy in allegiance to the spirit of Yshwa or Christ. Unlike other heterosexual beings who have sexual feelings towards the opposite sex, the human Ada does not harbour any "heat rising" or "the tricks of the body" [and] "the compulsions of the flesh."⁶⁹ By depicting the human Ada as sexually-neutral, Emezi destabilizes the naturalization of heterosexuality in some societies. The Ada becomes sexually active after the birth of Ashugara, her spiritual guide. In a 2018 interview, Emezi states that the character of Asugara has a combative purpose.⁷⁰ She is the Ada's weapon and shield. Emezi creates Ashugara to show that sometimes society is cruel to individuals who are different and transgressive. Asugara is a ferocious and sensuous spirit and a sexual force that fervently engages in sexual experiences through the Ada's body, often without regard for the consequences. Emezi characterises Asugara as "a child of trauma" because she born out of the

Ada's traumatic sexual experiences.⁷¹ Asughara's reckless sexual behaviour is evident in her relationship with Itohan and his brother. Through Asughara's sexual escapades, Emezi draws on African spirituality to explain sexual orientations that society often labels abnormal. The Ada is "never there" when Ashugara engage in her sexual escapades, yet her body is the vessel that embodies Asughara's feelings.⁷² The Ada's ability to embody different feelings symbolize the malleability of gender. Through the Ada's different spiritual forms, Emezi shows that different sexualities are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Unlike Asughara, who manifests in the Ada as a spirit that loves men, St. Vincent manifest as a spirit that loves women. St. Vincent enjoys "...the soft nape of a girl's neck against his mouth" and like Asughara, he uses the Ada as an instrument of his desires.⁷³ When St. Vincent inhabits her, the Ada starts dating women much to her family's disappointment. Through the Ada's complex sexuality, Emezi depicts a range of sexualities and desires: asexuality, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality. More importantly, *Freshwater* implies that queerness has a place in Igbo cosmology and/or spirituality.

Conclusion

This article drew on concepts from Stuart Hall's identity theory, Maria Lugones' notion of the coloniality of gender, and Judith Butler's gender performativity to analyze Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* as a text that appropriates the *ogbanje* concept to locate queer identities within Igbo spirituality. The article discussed the *ogbanje* concept as a literary trope that Emezi uses to foreground the fluidity of identity. Emezi capitalizes on the complexity of Igbo cosmology to carve out a space for alternative sexualities and ways of being. The *ogbanje* concept does not only locate queerness within Igbo cosmology but also debunks Western philosophies such as existentialism which depict humans as independent beings. In doing so, Emezi locates queer identities and ways of being within indigenous Igbo spirituality. We thus argue that *Freshwater* is a decolonial text that rejects the binaries of Western philosophy and embraces an Igbo philosophical and cultural framework that recognizes the multiplicity of identity. The "freshwater" of the title encapsulates new ways of thinking about gender, sexuality, and being woman/human, thus disrupting heteronormative practices and ways of being.

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Notes

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- ⁶ Boehmer 2009, p. 146.
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- ¹⁰ Butler 1988.
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- ¹³ Butler 1988, p. 525.
- ¹⁴ Oyewumi 1998, p. 1050.
- ¹⁵ Ngugi wa Thiongo 1997; Lugones 2010, p. 743.
- ¹⁶ Lugone, 2010, p. 743.
- ¹⁷ Mignolo 2007.
- ¹⁸ Kumm et al. 2019, p. 343.
- ¹⁹ Nwoye, 2011.
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- ²¹ Okafor 2016.
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- ²⁶ Nwoye 2011, p. 307.
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- ³⁰ Emezi 2018a, p. 218.
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- ⁴³ Okiri 1991, p. 40.
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- ⁴⁶ Achebe 1958, p. 78.
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- ⁵³ Tamale 2011, p. 19.
- ⁵⁴ Tamele 2011; Nyanzi 2013; Ratele 2005.
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