

**EMERGING PERSPECTIVES  
ON  
FLORA NWAPA:**

*Critical and Theoretical Essays*



EDITED BY MARIE UMEH

**Africa World Press, Inc.**

P.O. Box 1892  
Trenton, NJ 08607



P.O. Box 48  
Asmara, ERITREA

# An Interview with Flora Nwapa<sup>1</sup>



Sabine Jell-Bahlsen

Flora Nwapa's relationship to her hometown Ugwuta's<sup>2</sup> patron deity, the lake goddess Ogbuide/Uhamiri,<sup>3</sup> evolved over the years. This is evident from Nwapa's novels, as well as from an interview, I conducted with Flora Nwapa, together with Chief Francis Ebiri\* of Orsu-Obodo/Ugwuta II, in 1988.

At the time of the interview, I was involved in field research in and around Ugwuta studying the goddess, her worship, and her devotees. In addition, I was preparing the production of a documentary film on *Mammy Water*.<sup>4</sup> I had been invited by the priestess, Eze Mmiri di Egwu of Orsu-Obodo, during my first visit to Ugwuta in 1978. I was immediately fascinated by this powerful woman and her followers, and embarked on a long journey studying the goddess's worship and rituals. Chief Francis Ebiri has been my research assistant and translator all along, since we first met in Ugwuta in 1978. He is the son of the late Ebiri Obua of Orsu-Obodo, a widely known, highly respected diviner, herbalist, and priest of the lake goddess Uhamiri. Ebiri Obua has healed, initiated, and installed many of the current priests and priestesses of

\* Chief Francis Ebiri unexpectedly passed away at the age of 50 in his home on September 3, 1996.

people were *ordered in church not to believe*, as they did, that Ogbuide/Uhammiri, the lake goddess had saved them from invading soldiers.

The interview, together with her novels, reveals Nwapa's deep-seated ambivalency, not only towards Christian intrusions, but also against the lake goddess, Ogbuide/Uhammiri herself, her values, gifts, ethics, social codes, and requirements. While embracing the gift of wealth and success, commonly ascribed to Uhammiri, Nwapa questions the idea of the deity's other gift, the gift of children,<sup>7</sup> the blessing cherished most by Ugwuta people (male and female alike).

In *Efuru*, Nwapa raises doubts about the goddess, Uhammiri and her blessings. Some of Nwapa's characters question not only whether Uhammiri has children of her own, but also whether the deity would grant children/fertility, and by extension, whether the gift of children really represents a woman's ultimate desire. This proposition is almost unspeakable to local ears.<sup>8</sup> An ambitious woman endowed with money and higher education, Flora Nwapa strove to achieve more in life than the average Nigerian woman, or a "mother of many." In her understandable and highly contemporary desire for professional success and appreciation beyond the home, Nwapa inadvertently challenges a core value of Ugwuta society, customarily ascribed to the lake goddess.

Troubled by what Nwapa wrote about Mammywater/Uhammiri and children in *Efuru* and in *Mammywater*, I kept repeating this question during the interview. At first Nwapa responded naively, so it seems that "local people did not associate Uhammiri with children." Chief Ebiri, a man born, raised and living locally was surprised, shocked, and gasping in disbelief, when he heard what Nwapa said about "local beliefs." But, when I told Nwapa what *foreigners* had written about Mammy Water—that Mammywater was supposed to be foreign herself—it was Nwapa's turn to gasp in disbelief. At first, she thought that we were referring to a foreign John Holt worker who had "seen Mammywater." But when I went on to explain to her that foreigners had suggested that Mammywater was *herself* alien, Nwapa became very clear and firm. She knew and candidly explained two basic points about Ugwuta's lake goddess, Mammywater: 1) Mammywater's local name is Ogbuide/Uhammiri. She is a local deity and very authentic. 2) *Water is the life giving thing* (in Africa). As everyone in Ugwuta knows, the water goddess of the lake gives life, not only to plants and animals, but above all to humans in the form of children. The goddess

Uhammiri/Ogbuide is the Goddess of wealth *and* children, originally considered to be one. Nwapa knew this very well, even though *she chose not to propagate this (cultural) message* in her earlier work.

Ironically, missionaries aiming to destroy local beliefs and the loyalties of local people in their "pagan" deities would also take resort to introducing doubts about the merits and powers of these gods' and goddesses' abilities to give to people the most precious gift: children. However, Nwapa's deconstruction of the goddess's gifts of children was personal and genderized in motivation, rather than consciously serving the needs of a foreign organization, such as the church. After the Nigerian civil war, the lives of the heroines of Nwapa's novels and of the author herself, temporarily moved away from Ugwuta and its lake goddess, as *Women are Different* and *One is Enough* are set in Lagos. Yet, Nwapa's interest in Ugwuta's Lake Goddess grew, together with her awareness of the conflicts and crises introduced by foreign beliefs and interventions, even as she had distanced herself from home. By 1988, at the time of our interview, Nwapa had begun to rediscover local lore. 1988 may actually have been a turning point in Nwapa's own life, her interests and inquiries. From the interview, it becomes evident that Nwapa was reflecting upon her evolving relationship to the goddess of the lake, Ogbuide/Uhammiri. Shortly afterwards, Nwapa ventured to interview the Eze Mmiri of Orsu-Obodo, a major priestess of Uhammiri, in 1990. In 1988, Nwapa was still ambivalent about the goddess and her benefits to women. But she (re)constructed the deity's image in her last novel, *The Lake Goddess*, written after her encounter with the priestess. In this posthumously published work, Nwapa clearly voices her concerns about the conflicts created between local and foreign values. These conflicts are tearing apart peoples' minds and lives; they also drove the heroine of *The Lake Goddess*, Ona, the gift of the goddess, to the brink of madness. Nwapa's growing concern with the conflict between the double-edged benefits of local custom and its lake goddess to women on the one hand, and the equally double-edged benefit of Christianity and foreign values, on the other, is evident throughout the 1988 interview.

N: As a child stories fascinated me.

S: Just stories?

N: Yes, just stories. They are mysterious; we listen. I really listen; I sit down and listen before going to sleep, you know, late at night.



Others would go to sleep but I would listen to the story teller. That's where I learnt about Mammywater.

S: It's from those stories that you learnt about the goddess?

N: I definitely heard about her.

S: You are from Ugwuta?

N: I am from Ugwuta.

S: And of course, in Ugwuta, Mammy Water has a local name, like in so many places.

N: Yes. It's Uhammiri. It's Ogbuide.

I commissioned that painting. (She points at a large painting behind her desk.) I commissioned Uche Okeke to paint it for me.

S: I can see the lady with long hair.

N: That lady is supposed to be Ogbuide.

S: Aha. She has long hair.

N: Yes, it's supposed to be Ogbuide. The lady in the shadow is Ogbuide. But the lady with the necklace and the earrings is supposed to be Efuru.

S: Okay.

N: I commissioned him to paint Efuru in her glory.

S: Is that Efuru from your book, *Efuru*?

N: Efuru, hm. Yes, Efuru in her glory. Hm-mm.

S: When was this painting done?

N: It is nearly ten years old now. Each and every day it makes more meaning to me as the years are passing. I just sit there and then I watch it. Maybe it inspires me.

S: Yes. And I can see her wearing the costume of the Mammy Water worshippers. She is wearing the white dress.

N: Aha. That is what she is wearing.

S: Ogbuide is important for Efuru in your novel.

N: Yes.

S: Can you explain the importance of Ogbuide to Efuru?

N: What is the importance? Efuru from no fault of hers had had two unsuccessful marriages. Her only child dies. Her husband accuses her of adultery. I think that is the one that she could not take. Because in our tradition, the worst thing that can happen to a woman is for her husband to accuse her of adultery. It is a very serious offense. And if she is innocent, she invariably leaves her husband, especially if she is proven innocent. And this is exactly what Efuru did. That is, she did what was expected of her. That is, she went to the shrine and swore that she was not guilty of adultery. This question of adultery came up because of her illness. She became very ill and nobody knew what it was. So people said, "Oh,

she is very ill, this is because she did this." But she knew she was innocent. Any man who accuses you of adultery, you would not want to stay with. So when all these things had happened, Ogbuide, the Woman of the Lake, started appearing in her dreams. And she began to think that, oh after all, I am not actually of this world. I think I should do better if I become a worshipper of the Woman of the Lake.

S: So, Ogbuide, or Mammywater, as the English say, could be seen as somebody who will help a woman in her times of need?

N: Aha. Certainly, certainly in times of need.

S: And compensate her for losses?

N: Exactly.

S: And hardship?

N: Exactly. And another factor is that when an Ugwuta woman is prosperous, it is associated with the Woman of the Lake. Wealth is associated with the Woman of the Lake. And she herself thinks that it is not her own doing, that it is the Woman of the Lake who is doing it for her. She begins to worship the Woman of the Lake on her own without anybody telling her to do so.

S: I keep hearing in different places that Mammywater, or Ogbuide is very much associated with wealth....

N: Yes.

S: ... and with children.

N: But then, during the time of Efurū, those I know who worshipped the Woman of the Lake invariably did not have children. They did not have children of their own. I don't know why this was so. Mammywater was not associated with children. In the last pages of my book, *Efurū*, I was saying this because it was something that I could not understand. It is the medical doctor talking to Efurū:

"Where is Adizua? Any news about Adizua?"

"I have heard nothing about him. To me he has been dead years ago."

"So he did not return?"

"No he did not return."

The doctor shook his head.

"How is your wife? I have not asked."

"Oh she is well. I left her in the country of the white people."

"All alone?"

"She lives with an elderly woman who takes great care of her and her two sons."

"That is good. I think I should be going," Efurū says, getting up.

"I think you should consider going back to your husband, Efurū."

"It is not possible."

"Let day break, Efurū."

"Let day break." Efurū slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the Woman of the Lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake and was as old as the lake itself. She was wealthy, she was beautiful. She gave women beauty. But she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?" (281)

That was in my last page, the last sentence of my book.

S: Yes. I remember that.

N: Why did the women worship her, if the women are so preoccupied with bearing children? Our culture demands that a woman must have a child, and if a woman does not have a child, she is not fulfilled. But here is this Woman of the Lake who was never associated with having children deified by the community. Why then do the women worship her when she has no children? Do they worship her because she brings them wealth? Is it just wealth that they want? Or, do they also want children? But then, if they want children, which is so important in their culture, why do they worship her? But at that time, nobody associated the Woman of the Lake with children. No one. No one at the time when *Efurū* was written and when I was growing up.

E: [Gasping in disbelief.]

S: So the historical time of your book setting is ...?

N: It is when I was growing up. That was in the late thirties and early forties.

E: And by the time Efurū became a woman associated with the Woman of the Lake, how old was she? I want to know if perhaps she was above the age of getting pregnant.

N: Yes. I understand your question. The period seems to be 1940-1950.

E: Okay.

N: That is the period I had in mind. I was born in 1931, and at that time, Efurū got married to her husband. Efurū should have been about sixteen. Efurū could not have been younger than fifteen. She was about sixteen.

S: That was the normal time to get married at the time? So she did not go to school; so she could marry early?

E: What was the age when she started having the dispute with her husband?

N: Ah, she must have been a very young person, if she was sixteen when she married [laughs]. The story takes place around 1930-35. Don't you think so?

S: Yes. And she had had a child who died.

N: Yes. So you see that was the period I was writing about. And remember the period was not after the Second World War. The Second World War ended in 1945.

E: Yes.

N: Then there was not much emphasis on wealth and material things as we have it today. There were no cars then, no Mercedes, no radios, no TVs, nothing like that.

S: [Laughs.] Were not children equivalent to wealth in the old days?

N: Yes. You had farms in Ugwuta at the time with wealthy women who traded with UAC, John Holt, etc., in Ugwuta. And that was the time that I was writing about in *Efuru*. You see, *they* never associated the Woman of the Lake with child-bearing.

E: Giving children.

S: At this time wealth is considered money. But then, before that time, wealth was children!

N: Wealth was children, then.

The first important achievement for a woman was to have children. If she did not have children, it was such a handicap. And what she did at that time was to get young people to stay with her. It was slaves before, buying slaves, bringing them in her household and then the slaves would have children. I think this practice was accepted then.

E: Well, she has made the wealth also.

N: Aha, because only a wealthy woman who was barren could buy slaves. That was not possible for the poor. So we are talking of the well-to-do, the rich woman.

S: A change in the notion of wealth has taken place.

N: Yes.

S: In the very old days, somebody would be considered wealthy if she had many children. Then later on, a woman could be wealthy just from money.

N: Yes from money, that is, from material possessions.

S: Today, a person may actually be caught up in a conflict between



money and children. Because as you pointed out earlier, somebody may find it hard to do trading and bring up small children.

N: Yes, if you start making money, people would say in Ugwuta even today, "Ah, ah, please, get married first. Have one or two children and then, you can go on to make money. Time passes as they say. Not that the time passes biologically, but they claim that if your mind is all set on wealth, then "children will run away." [She laughs.]

E: I think age is a factor in this case.

S: I mean what you are addressing is a very universal problem relating to any nation or country.

N: Exactly.

S: Either making money or getting ahead professionally, and then having children ....

N: Yes.

E: And you see, one other thing is that a woman who is not with her husband, and who is a worshipper of a goddess like Ogbuide might prefer to keep herself reserved and in that case, child-bearing would not come her way.

N: No, [it] would not come her way.

E: I am looking at it from a different angle, a man's point of view. In the case of Efurū....

S: There may be a contradiction between looking for money and success and having children. I mean it is a lot of pressure in a woman's life.

N: Yes.

S: So, is Mammywater the one who sort of compensates or helps a woman to sustain the pressure?

N: It depends on the woman herself. Some say that Mammywater chooses them, like in *Efurū*.

S: Yes.

N: When she goes to bed, she dreams, and all that. She tells her father. Her father says this is the sign. Mammywater has chosen you to be one of her worshippers. So in that case that was what Efurū was doing. Efurū, she was now past child-bearing, remember, and she had already "made it," she was wealthy. All she wanted from Mammywater was that peace of mind. It was just the peace of mind that she wanted. Of course, you have in these modern days the material things. Many women will voluntarily seek the help of Mammywater without feeling that they want to be called. In those days, these people who were called behaved in an extraordinary way.

S: You mean they were deviant from normal women?

N: Yes. When a woman would just suddenly begin to sing Mammywater [songs], something happened and she might begin to dress differently, and make sacrifices to Mammywater. She would worship her in short. Then we know that it is something that is genuine. Today, I don't know how genuine it is for women who say they worship Mammywater.

S: I don't know. But we have been interviewing many different people and heard different stories. Often the person would say that they were very ill, or [to E.] remember the woman at Calabar who was a maid. She would not fulfill her duties. She would just stand and stare. And it was a form of illness that she could not cope with the social demands.

E: Exactly.

S: So she was having dreams and when they finally brought her to a priest, a fully installed person, they would interpret it as being called by Mammywater.

N: Yes.

S: So the belief in the goddess helps them to find their way.

N: Yes, to have peace of mind.

E: Some even consult diviners to find out why they are sick.

N: Yes.

E: If it is proven that they are being called by the mermaid, they will be taken to somebody who can effect a cure, that is a worshipper of the mermaid....

N: Exactly.

E: ... And the priests and priestesses initiate them....

N: Exactly.

E: ... And that is how we found these worshippers whom we interviewed.

N: Like in *Efuru*, after illness, after disappointment, she becomes a worshipper.

E: Yes.

N: After disappointment, illness, and things like that, you want peace of mind. It is not so much wealth, is it? The case is not so.

S: No. It is peace of mind. In the cases we saw, wealth was sort of secondary. Peace of mind is what people were searching for. After peace of mind, wealth joined in and was ascribed to Mammywater from what I have seen.

N: But then you can have cases where you find that somebody comes to you and tells you that if you sacrifice to Mammywater, you are going to be a very wealthy person. And then, if you do it,

maybe a door or two will open for you. It can happen.

S: What of yourself now? Mammywater features prominently in so many of your books and stories. We have mentioned *Efuru* and then there is also your children's book, entitled *Mammywater*, and I think she also appears in *Idu*.

N: Oh yes, she appears in *Idu*.

S: Why are you so interested in Mammywater?

N: That is what I was talking about. It is because I have been told these fantastic stories about Mammywater and lots and lots of things about her building under the water. Then there was something about her palm tree that attracted my attention and how she came out and met with human beings. These are the stories that you believed as a child, as you believe in father Christmas. My children do. So that was the sort of thing I believed in. But I would have thought that I would really have been a worshipper....

E: Because you have eventually found peace?

N: [Laughs.] I should have been a worshipper. But maybe it is my Western education that prevented me from being a worshipper. If I did not receive this kind of education....

E: Then you could have been a worshipper, but then....

N: ... But then my Christian background ... because my parents were the children of the first converts. My two grandmothers were Christians. They baptised us almost at the same time. Then they were fanatics about Christianity. We were exposed to so many things. We children were not allowed to do certain things, like talking about Mammywater. My [parents] called her worship "paganism"; they talked of "heathens" .... But then I was lucky because I went to live with my grandmother at a very early age in a huge compound. Not only my mother, but there were so many women who were not Christians. That was a more relaxed atmosphere. There, I was able to listen to all those stories of Mammywater, Okita, and all those things. I could not help hearing all those stories. If I had stayed with my parents, because they were Christians, they would not take interest [condone my participation] in "pagan" rituals. Remember that the "idols" and all those shrines for the local deities were destroyed. It is because of my sensitivity to these stories. Sabine, I cannot explain it, but I am not a worshipper. Yet invariably, Mammywater occurs in my stories. Even in *Never Again*. At the end of the war, let me show you: "Many people were not home yet. There was no home to return to at the end of the war."

S: Aha. You are quoting from *Never Again*.

N: Yes, I am reading from *Never Again*. It deals with the war and Ugwuta people.

S: So again you find people grateful to Uhammiri for...

N: And that is it. I remember that. There was so much about it. There was so much about the deliverance of Uhammiri. Who wants the church? Let me briefly tell you the story. We returned to Ugwuta in 1967 or 1968. By September '68, the federal troops had overrun Owerri and were pushing on to Ugwuta. But then there was an attack from Port Harcourt and one afternoon, we saw ourselves fleeing. We got to Mgbidi, the place was set on fire, then we stayed about 10 kilometers from Mgbidi, and a month, not quite, 3 or 4 days after we fled, we were told that the federal troops had been driven away from Ugwuta. I did not immediately go there, but my husband and my brother went. They reported that everything was gone; that all the people had left the town. It was a battleground and people could not go in. So we had to wait for about 2-3 months, before we went home again. Some waited until the end of the war.

S: People were afraid of the fighting?

N: Yes. We returned to Ugwuta before the war ended. Then, when the war ended, Ugwuta people were full of praise for the Woman of the Lake. They said that the Woman of the Lake was responsible for their coming back to their homes. Because it was only in Ugwuta, that is, within the Biafran territory, that the people were driven from their homes and came back, I think between Ugwuta and one or two other places. The federal troops just landed. Within 24 hours they were wiped out. You see, Ugwuta people attributed this to the powers of Uhammiri.<sup>9</sup> Because to them, it is Uhammiri that protects them. Not only women and children. She protects everybody. There is even a precedent for this in the history of Ugwuta. In the 19th century, some troops came from the Midwest to fight against Ugwuta.

S: From Benin?

N: Yes, from the kingdom of Benin. You know we have a boundary with the Midwest on the other side [of the River Niger]. The story—it could be a legend—has it that the waters of the lake, Uhammiri, parted when the troops were coming. When they got to the middle of the lake, Uhammiri closed up again and all of them drowned. It is just like the parting of the waters of the Red Sea in the bible.

S: That was an earlier invasion from the Benin kingdom?

N: Yes, from the Benin area. Now whether this is true or not, I



don't know. But this is a story that has been handed down from generation to generation. And the Ugwuta man believes that no army of occupation coming across the lake ever goes back alive. The Woman of the Lake would destroy that army. Now when the Nigerian federal troops came from Port Harcourt crossing the lake, Ugwuta people said it was the lake that drove the invading army away from Ugwuta. Now in church, the pastor got so angry when he heard this that he did not mince words. He told Ugwuta people, "Either you are a Christian, or not." And I was in church that day. S: This is appalling. He actually told the people that they could not be Christians if they continued believing in what was dear to them!

N: Exactly.

S: Those fanatics try to alienate people from the very holy grounds—and waters—of their hometown.

N: Exactly.

S: This could create a lot of pressure on a person.

N: Yes exactly. This is the situation. But you find now that as time goes on, Christianity lost out. Christianity is losing its grip on the people.

S: Yes, as people are getting more educated, they will realize the importance of their own culture. And because of education they will no longer fall easy victim to this type of foreign indoctrination.

N: Exactly. So I have not fully made up my mind on my own position, yet.

S: Uhammiri is just there.

N: It's just there. I cannot give an example. I cannot say this is why I am doing it. It is just in me.

S: There are foreigners who have said that Mammywater is a foreign import.

N: That Mammywater is a foreign import?

E: A foreign import.

N: It was during the time of early colonialization. I think [there] is a piece of writing by Chinua Achebe about Mammywater appearing to an UAC official.

S: Oh, you mean appearing to a foreigner?

N: A foreigner.

S: No. That is not what I am referring to. I am referring to some foreign scholars who say that Mammywater *herself* came from abroad. These people claim that the worship of Mammywater itself is a foreign cult similar to Christianity. One of the reasons these

authors give is the use of an imported chromolithograph being used in the worship of the goddess. What do you think of that?

N: Oh my God! [Laughs.]

S: How did Mammywater come to Ugwuta?

N: It has been there all the time. It is like any of our gods and goddesses. It is just there. It is connected with water. And *water is the life giving thing*.

S: You are saying that Mammywater is indigenous, that she originated in Ugwuta?

N: I should think so. Very authentic. Very original. Because we have a name for it. It is Ogbuide.

E: And it is not a god of foreigners?

N: And you can see that I don't call her Mammywater in *Efuru*.

S: No [you don't].

N: I either call [her] Uhammiri<sup>10</sup> or Ogbuide.

S: Yes.

N: You see, I used the name *Mammywater*, because I was writing a children's book. And I know that Mammywater is something that will attract children.

S: You will find the same name in Lagos or Ibadan.

N: That's right. Going to different locations Mammywater is a more acceptable name than the highly localized name of Uhammiri, in Nigeria and even in West Africa.

S: Yes, it is used in Ghana and in the Ivory Coast.

N: Yes.

S: The name, Mammywater, is used in many places for the group's localized water spirits, mysterious beings from the water.

N: Yes, water spirits.

E: In our interviews very many people say that Mammywater goes to the market. Is this true, and what does it mean?

N: I have said that the stories I heard as a child depicted Mammywater coming out of the water. Then she goes shopping in the market.

E: In this case she makes herself visible to the people?

N: Yes. It was believed at the time that she makes herself visible. Although nobody has said to me, "Yes, I saw her," or something [like that]. But because of hearsay, this person said, that person said, it is believed that on Nkwo<sup>11</sup> days in Ugwuta, Mammywater will come out, and Mammywater will buy.

S: And of course, Ugwuta's market is right by the water side.<sup>12</sup>

N: Yes.

E: Did you also hear that Mammywater made friends with some

prominent Ugwuta men and women?

N: Yes, yes.

E: And she goes to their houses?

N: Yes, I have heard that also. But then at the time I was writing, at the time I was growing up, Mammywater was not associated with men because she was associated with women. But as time went on, I discovered that it was said that Mammywater is a friend to such and such a person. And that Mammywater used to visit him at night. Do you hear that?

E: Yes, I hear that. Can you also tell us about the relationship between Uhammiri and Urashi?

N: I was trying to do that in one of my stories, a sequence to *Mammywater*. I have not actually succeeded in what I wanted to do. So it has not actually been published yet. We have a legend that Uhammiri or Ogbuide quarreled constantly with Okita. Okita is the water spirit of Urashi. We call it Okita. As a child, I went to my grandfather's, my father's father. My paternal grandfather was not a Christian. He resisted Christianity until the end. My grandmother on the other hand was a fanatic Christian, [so much so] that it broke their marriage.

S: You see what damage it does.

N: Their conflicting religious beliefs broke their marriage. I think he was celebrating [an ancestor]. I remember it very clearly. Either he was feasting his ancestors, or another spirit. And when that happens, a goat is killed and children hang around, and of course, as Christians we were not allowed [to participate]. We were not allowed to go there. But unknown to our parents, I went [to my grandfather's compound]. Our paternal grandfather receives us but not other children. He was so delighted to see us. And there was one man there who was staring and somebody (not my grandfather) said that it was Okita. The man laughed and said it was Okita [Urashi, the river god].

S: Okita was in the crowd?

N: [Laughing] Yes, he was in the crowd. It was a smallish person, you know. He had this white chalk there, and there he was, standing, and this child was telling me, "Look, that's Okita!" [She laughs.] And whether he was the one ... I don't know why he had come to my grandfather who was feeding his ancestors. So there was just constant quarrel between my paternal grandparents; similar to the Woman of the Lake and Okita. I think it has something to do with supremacy. Who should be superior over the other.

S: Are they actually husband and wife?

- N: Yes, they are husband and wife.
- E: Is Okita not believed to be a human being?
- N: I said that Okita is a human being but also a spirit. These beliefs are open to interpretations. I referred to Okita as Urashi in *Mammywater*.
- S: Yes, you mentioned it in the book.
- N: I mentioned it in the book:  
"Great spirit, I had to wait for ten years ... I send people to Urashi to ...."
- Listen, I think there is something I mentioned about Urashi and Mammywater. [She turns some pages of her book, *Mammywater*.]
- S: I think when they ...
- N: Where they meet Okita, the Spirit of the Urashi River, with the eagle feather. This is a fish [pointing to the picture on p. 36]. He uses a fish to fan himself.
- S: Aha.
- E: Like a messenger?<sup>13</sup>
- N: No, it is not a messenger, but [a] priest, a sort of priest. Let me see ...  
"Yes, of course, you said we are going to see Urashi," says Deke.  
"Yes, to pay our respects. I sometimes go there with distinguished visitors."  
"Distinguished visitors! Am I a distinguished visitor?"  
"Now, now, you are asking too many questions again ...." (35)
- So this is it. You see they quarrel constantly.
- S: And you mentioned the dividing line ...
- N: Aha, between the lake and the river. You have seen it?
- S: Yes, I have seen it.
- N: You have seen the muddy and the clear water. These waters are separate, they never mix. And it's been there for ages.
- E: And some people say they are husband and wife.
- N: Some people say they are husband and wife and they quarrel a lot. They are husband and wife ... of course husband and wife quarrel [laughter]. That is very natural.
- S: And one is red and one is white.
- N: No, it is not red really.
- S: Urashi? Is he not red?
- N: No, he is muddy. And another thing is that because the lake's water is clear, deep blue and all that, the lake people look down on the river as small and ugly....
- S: What about the animals you mentioned, especially the snake?



N: Yes, you find the snake and the crocodile in the river, but *not* in the lake.

S: Aha?

N: Not in the lake. There are no crocodiles in the lake.

E: We mean to say that there are animals that are a favorite of the lake goddess.

N: There are animals that exist in rivers but not in the lake.

S: So, Uhammiri does not associate with the snake?

N: Yes. But Urashi does. And this is what they believe in.

S: What of the tortoise?

N: Tortoise. I think the tortoise can be found mainly in the river.

S: A more personal question: I think your husband has built a temple at Urashi's sacred grove?

N: Hm.

S: Can you say anything about it?

N: No. I have not seen it. It is believed that his wealth comes from the water deities. [She laughs]

E: Very interesting.

S: From Urashi?

N: No from Uhammiri.

S: From Uhammiri? So why did he build his temple at the site of the old shrine of Urashi on the river, not on the lake, by Uhammiri's shrine? Is it because he is a man?

N: No. He has a hotel at the river. Have you seen it? It has been there for a long time. It is fantastic but not finished. He spent real money on it. It is beautiful, by the Urashi riverside.

S: [To Ebiri] You have mentioned it. It is by the river side.

N: It is supposed to be a tourist attraction.

S: What of yourself now? You are independently wealthy.

N: You cannot say that I am poor.

S & E: No.

N: You are asking whether my wealth is associated with the goddess?

S: Yes, the goddess.

N: But of course you know my father was a wealthy man. Have you seen the plantations we have in Ugwuta?

S: No.

E: I have only taken her to your mother's old building. That is where my junior sister lives.

N: Aha.

S: And we met your brother playing tennis, but that was all.

N: Okay.

S: You were going to tell us something about your writing.

N: When I have a story and the story is clear in my mind, all I know is that I am just writing a story, not wanting to impress anybody, not wanting to put anything down, or write a moral lesson, or whatever. I discover that I write better that way. So that was how I wrote *Mammywater*, spontaneously. I just liked the idea and the stories of *Mammywater*. I don't know whether or not you know Michael Crowder? Somebody was telling me that he died this year. Michael Crowder was a historian who has been in Nigeria for many years. He worked for the Nigerians and he has written so many books. In 1976-77, Crowder came to Enugu and looked me up and said he wanted to go to Ugwuta. I said Okay. I was not doing anything at the time. I was thinking of setting up a publishing company. So I took him to Ugwuta. He said he wanted to see the lake. So we took a dug-out canoe with an old woman, you know these old women who paddle. And we went there past the lake to Urashi. We went to where the gunboat has sunk. Have you gone there?

S: No, I have not been there.

E: You must see that.

N: So as we were coming back, as I was giving him the landmarks, I said, "As a child we believed that the Woman of the Lake lived there. That is the shrine of the Woman of the Lake. You see the confluence of the river and the lake. You see the confluence of the lake and the muddy water. They never mix." And I just went [to Ugwuta] and came back to [Enugu]. We had lunch and he went back to Ibadan. The day after I returned to Enugu, I took up writing *Mammywater*. And two days after, I just finished writing *Mammywater*. You see, I have never thought about it. After that visit, I began writing and that is how I wrote *Mammywater*. It never occurred to me that I was going to write *Mammywater*. So I began to write and I saw what was going on. That is how it was.

S: Just by intuition.

N: Yes.

S: You know my own case is quite the same because I came here as an academic to do research. But *Mammywater* attracted me.

N: You were drawn to *Mammywater*.

S: I never dreamt of making a film ...

N: Yes.

S: I am not a filmmaker originally.

N: Aha.

S: I never dreamt about making a film about *Mammywater* in particular. The idea developed as I learnt more about the Lake Goddess

from the people of Ugwuta.

N: Aha.

S: And it grew from there. It is not something that I have consciously planned. Although, of course, by trying to realize it, I had to start planning.

N: Exactly. That is how it is.

S: That is, once you are in it, then... I mean you have to start thinking about it. Once you start writing a book, then you have to start thinking about how to print it.

N: Yes. So that is how it went. That is how my own fascination for the Woman of the Lake grew. It is so alive. And as it is, I should have a little shrine. [She laughs]

S: Or, we could have one together. [Laughter]

E: And I will be the one to initiate you both. [Laughter]

## NOTES

1. At Flora Nwapa's office in Enugu on November 4, 1988.
2. Ugwuta is the Igbo name of an Igbo town named Oguta by the British colonial administration. Ugwuta is located in Imo State of southeastern Nigeria. The British name and spelling, Oguta, is still in use by the contemporary Nigerian administration and on road maps. Ugwuta and her sister towns, Orsu-Obodo, Esi-Orsu, Nnebukwu, Nkwesi, Mgbelle, and Izombe form a group of towns known as the Oru. The Oru, Omoko and Onitsha are the riverine Igbo, a division of the Igbo people, an ethnic group of approximately 20 million people in Southeastern Nigeria. The Oru speak a dialect of the Igbo language and distinguish themselves through their own cultural peculiarities. On the other hand, the Oru also share certain cultural and linguistic features with the Igbo people as a whole.
3. The lake goddess associated with Ugwuta lake is known by several different names, e.g. Uhammiri and Ogbuide. The goddess's praise name and form of address is Eze Nwanyi, or Eze Mmiri (Water Monarch), a title also given to her priestesses. In a similar vein, the people who worship this goddess use several different names for themselves on the ethnic, community, and individual levels. See also S. Jell-Bahlsen, "Names and Naming: Instances from the Oru Igbo" *Dialectical Anthropology* 13 (1989):199-207.
4. This film was produced in 1989 and published in the USA in 1991 as *Mammy Water: In Search of the Water Spirits in Nigeria*. (Berkeley: University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 1991). I had lived for a year in Orsu-Obodo/Oguta II, in 1978/9, and have returned there many times since, developing an ongoing relationship with the local community, while pursuing many months of in-depth field research over a prolonged period of time.
5. To this day, it is somewhat puzzling why Nwapa did not establish a shrine for the Lake Goddess, as many Ugwuta people expected her to do,

because they ascribe Nwapa's professional success to *their* Lake Goddess, Ogbuide/Uhammiri. Nwapa also refused the priestess's 1990 request to perform a major sacrifice of a cow to Ogbuide/Uhammiri, because of her Christian background, upbringing, and social standing, as Nwapa herself told me during her visit to New York in 1991. By contrast, and as is common knowledge in Ugwuta, a man from Omoko built a temple for Ogbuide in her sacred grove to publically demonstrate his gratefulness to this deity. In a similar vein, Nwapa's husband has built a temple in appreciation of the goddess's help at the river god Urashi's sacred grove on the river bank.

6. During the colonial days, when Nwapa attended school, the school system of that part of the country was dominated by the missions and various churches. After independence the schools were officially secularized, but many are still heavily influenced and controlled by their original confessional sponsors.
7. See also Jell-Bahlsen (in this anthology) "Flora Nwapa and Uhammiri/Ogbuide, the Lake Goddess: An Evolving Relationship."
8. See also Jell-Bahlsen's "The Concept of Mammy Water in Flora Nwapa's Novels" *Research in African Literatures*, 26, 2 (Summer 1995):30-41 and (in this anthology) "Flora Nwapa and Uhammiri/Ogbuide, Eze Nwanyi, the Lake Goddess: An Evolving Relationship."
9. This belief is still strong in Ugwuta today. My documentary film, *Mammy Water: In Search of the Water Spirits in Nigeria*, presents the on-camera account of an elderly Ugwuta woman, Madame Nwametu, who narrates that Uhammiri "drowned the enemies' gunboat during the [Nigerian civil] war."
10. There are different possible spellings. In *Efuru*, Nwapa uses the spelling Uhammiri. I am following the translations and spellings of Chief Ebiri, who assured me that Uhammiri is locally spelled with "mm" as in the Igbo word, "mmiri" (water).
11. The Igbo week has four market days called Nkwo, Eke, Orie, and Afor in Ugwuta. Markets rotate, as each town holds its market on a different day. Ugwuta's market day is Nkwo.
12. I was here referring to Ugwuta's old market, the Umudei market located directly on the Umudei waterside. This market burnt down some time ago but still exists. A major market in the past, it now appears small when compared to the new market with modern cement stalls built at the opposite end of town, near where the main road enters the town. The new market is in partial session every day, but fully occupied only on Nkwo days.
13. "Messenger" here means "a local deity," as the villagers deferentially refer to their local deities, the Arishi, as "messengers" [of the supreme god, Chi-Ukwu].