

MARRIED IN THE WATER:  
SPIRIT KIN AND OTHER AFFLICTIONS OF MODERNITY  
IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

BY

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As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity . . . Those of us who made such vows were known among the Living as *abiku*, spirit-children. Not all people recognised us. We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding.

Those who broke their pacts were assailed by hallucinations and haunted by their companions. They would only find consolation when they returned to the world of the Unborn, the place of fountains, where their loved ones would be waiting for them silently.

Those of us who lingered in the world, seduced by the annunciation of wonderful events, went through life with beautiful and fated eyes, carrying within us the music of a lovely and tragic mythology. Our mouths utter obscure prophecies. Our minds are invaded by images of the future. We are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world.

We were often recognised and our flesh marked with razor incisions. When we were born again to the same parents the marks, lingering on our new flesh, branded our souls in advance. Then the world would spin a web of fate around our lives. Those of us who died while still children tried to erase these marks, by making beautiful spots or interesting discolorations of them. If we didn't succeed, and were recognised, we were greeted with howls of dread, and the weeping of mothers.

from Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992: 4)

When his mother asked what was wrong with him, the *dibia* [healer/diviner] told her that he was married in the water, he was an *ogbaanje* [returning child]. His mother didn't like that. She didn't know what to do.

from a story about an *ogbaanje* child, told to the author by a young Igbo woman in late 1987

*Introduction: Strange Alliances*

Although anthropological specialists in spirit possession often note the close, even intimate relationship between spirits and their human

hosts (e.g. Boddy, 1989; Lambek, 1980; Lewis, 1971 [1989]), more might be said about corporate relations between these groups—that is to say, relations of alliance and even of kinship between inhabitants of spirit and human realms. One reason for the paucity of such analyses must be that possession and shamanism, the two grand anthropological categories for human-spiritual relations, have traditionally been described either as highly personalistic transactions or as the basis for nonlineage-based organizations like the various possession ‘cults’ of Muslim Africa—for example, *zar* in the northern part of the continent, or *bori* in the west.<sup>1</sup>

Only the most recent work on possession begins to interrogate how local ideological constructions of alliance impinge upon the social organization of both the possessed and their spiritual possessors. Theorists of possession like Boddy (1989) and Masquelier (1993) have recentered anthropological discourse on the subject to include a consideration of possession as social map or social ‘allegory.’ (See Boddy, 1989: 337-60.) By reapplying the techniques of ethnography to possession organizations, these anthropologists allow us to explore the complex and meaningful relations between spiritual forces and their sometimes willing, sometimes reluctant hosts; never losing sight of how human-spirit relations can offer a commentary as well on local-level historical and political consciousness.

Since it is restricted to societies that practise forms of organized possession, however, this work does not transcend the grand categorization referred to above. People still are described as entering into personal contracts with spirits that certainly implicate their larger families or cultic organizations, but the possibility of corporate ties between spirits and the unpossessed (or uncontracted) remain largely unexamined. The present paper is an attempt at opening up the discussion of spirit-human relations to include those who fall outside classical descriptions of possession, shamanism, or mediumship. It does so by looking at a series of related cases in one West African country, Nigeria—and in one group of linguistically related peoples, Igbo speakers in Nigeria’s southeastern region.<sup>2</sup>

Igbo-speaking people who are *ogbaanje*, as we shall see, have the closest possible ties to the spirit world but are not possessed by spirits. Nor are those afflicted with *ogwummili* (water medicine) necessarily destined for mediumship, even though they commune, somewhat reluctantly, with particular water spirits. As will emerge more clearly in the discussion below, it is no cultural accident that these relationships transcending material, temporal, and spiritual boundaries should be referred

to in the idiom of kinship. Kinship in contemporary Nigeria is a peculiarly ambiguous medium; one that must encompass localized lineage structures adjusting to the pressures of mobile, urban life, state-level political domination, and a new, more extreme form of exogamy that includes other Nigerian ethnic groups as well as foreigners met during periods of out-migration in the west (and beyond). Being 'married in the water' thus may be only one of a continuum of responses to Igbo-speaking peoples' very modern problems of connectedness to and confrontation with a world of alterity.

*Ogbaanje (Returning Children): Strangers in Our Midst*

'The problem with those *ogbaanje*,' a friend and sometimes informant complained to me, 'is that they are never still. They will never agree with you; they will never listen to you. They'd rather listen to *ndi otu* [literally people of the meeting, spiritual companions], more than their own father and mother. What can you do? They are strange.' In 1987-88, while doing fieldwork on the major market system in Onitsha, Nigeria, I constantly heard stories about *ogbaanje* (returning children), their spirit companions (*ndi otu*), and the mysterious concept of being 'married in the water'—that is, allied with the well-known Mami Wata spirit or some other *ndi mmili* (water spirits, literally water people). In some tales, the condition of *ogbaanje*—which another friend of mine rather humorously called 'ogbaanjism'—was closely associated with *ndi mmili*; in others, the Mami Wata devotee or nonspecific water spouse seemed completely exonerated from *ogbaanje*-like behavior.

As Ben Okri describes so eloquently if obliquely above, *ogbaanje* (also known as *emere* and *abiku* in other regions of Nigeria) are spirits who manifest themselves in human flesh by taking over or causing a pregnancy and finally suffer themselves to be born into the world of human beings. I say 'suffer themselves to be born' here because this entry into the world of humans is considered to be very much at their personal choice. If they did not choose the route of the *ogbaanje*, they could remain in the spirit world and never incarnate as humans. Although this is a choice, it is not exactly conceptualized as a free choice, and the notion of contract does come into play. But this is a contract between spirits—literally between the *ogbaanje* (incarnate spirit) and his/her *ndi otu*, spirit community. As Okri says, a 'pact' is made: the *ogbaanje* will not tarry long in his/her humanity but will return to *ndi otu* as soon as he or she has his/her fill of human life, preferably before adolescence.

Spirit companions take the *ogbaanje* pact very seriously; this is an agreement between equals, subject to very severe sanctions. Their relations with the human beings who are unfortunate enough to have drawn their attention are quite different. By common Igbo report, *ndi ogbaanje* are mischievous beings who want to torment their earthly families with the promise of healthy children, only to destroy that promise later with sickness and premature death. Not content to die once and return to their spirit home, *ndi ogbaanje* return again and again—repeating and somehow feeding on the cycle of human hope and despair that bearing *ogbaanje* children brings. As Okri also notes, families who are afflicted by what they suspect is an *ogbaanje* often privately mutilate the corpse of the dead child and look for telltale marks on their nextborn. If such marks are found, the infant is treated as an *ogbaanje*, given special, efficacious names, talked to as an already mature person, often petted and deferred to in everything.<sup>3</sup>

In the early colonial period, some Igbo-speaking groups tattooed or hung young *ogbaanje* with expensive charms—partially to beautify the *ogbaanjes'* bodies in the hopes of pleasing them and partially to mark them out for meticulously polite treatment by the community at large. It was then thought, as it is still thought, that the *ogbaanje* child could be easily offended and was always prepared to find any excuse for dying and leaving its parents. Because of this, the charms and tattoos were also medicated in an attempt to prevent family enemies from striking through the immoderate sensibilities of *ogbaanje* children. One might also consider these decorations to be signs inscribed on the body that told of the incomplete quality of attachment felt by parents and lineage mates. That is, they were signs that not only suggested the imminent danger to the (child's) body but also were signs that marked out the *ogbaanje* body as a transgressive force (space) in the human community—more specifically within the patrilineage. While deciding whether to stay or to die, in the present day as well as in the past, the *ogbaanje* child could not be treated as an ordinary being; it was and is both a potential blessing and a threat to its unwitting kin.

While making its second choice (between human and spirit life), the *ogbaanje* child is not only a threat to its human kin. His/her spirit companions also act like a kind of kin, threatened with the loss of an important group member.<sup>4</sup> If the incarnated *ogbaanje* child tries to break that pact for any reason, he or she will be tormented by the *ndi otu*. They will appear only to him or her, speak in voices no purely human person can hear, and cajole or threaten the *ogbaanje* until he or she agrees to die. Evidently the companions constantly remind their wavering,

embodied member about the pact and offer him/her both incentives and sanctions during these appearances. Most accounts of this type of *ogbaanje* death are simple: the *ogbaanje* refuses to eat or take comfort in anything, speaks to invisible company or not at all, and finally dwindles away. In other words, the *ogbaanje* eschews the work of ordinary sociality and the needs of the human body, embracing bodily death and spiritual companionship. The timing of these outbreaks of what human kin perceive to be affliction are particularly interesting: although the *ogbaanje* is susceptible to death at any time, he/she is most endangered soon after birth and at the onset of puberty. In cases where a person's 'ogbaanje nature' has gone previously undetected, the crisis often is precipitated by the prospect of marriage.

In other words, affliction classically occurs at the moments when the *ogbaanje* demonstrates, most concretely, his/her connection to human kin—and adds to the complexity of those relations by receiving his/her first name (just after birth), showing his/her human reproductive potential (arrival of puberty), and begins to fulfil his/her lineage, and broader human, obligations by contemplating marriage.<sup>5</sup> Another way of looking at this would be to suggest that these are the moments when the spirit person becomes possessed, in the classical terms alluded to above, by its human counterpart—an affliction that appears to distress the *ogbaanje*'s spirit kin tremendously.<sup>6</sup> The spirits' reaction to the *ogbaanje*'s further enmeshment in the body is to try to dispossess the body, to separate the spirit person from its incarnation by death. If this seems to posit a rather cartesian dualism for Igbo-speaking peoples, I would only say that there are normally various forms of spirit residing in and about any one Igbo body. The case of the *ogbaanje* is an extreme one, because this is a spirit that has never been ancestral, and it is not completely clear to me if *ogbaanje* can be said to possess a *chi*.<sup>7</sup> Whether *ndi ogbaanje* have *chi* or not, however, they most certainly are seen as afflicted by the human beings around them—and this affliction must be addressed.

Once the deadly symptoms appear, the *ogbaanje*'s human family must be quick to seek the advice of a reputable healer. In contemporary Nigeria, this healer does not have to be a *dibia* (the 'traditional' healer/diviner).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a number of evangelical Protestant, spiritual, and charismatic Catholic practitioners now offer courses of prayer, fasting, and pastoral intervention to 'cut *ogbaanje*.' In the late 1980s, a very popular charismatic Catholic priest named Father Edeh specialized in exorcising *ndi otu* (spirit companions), not just for Igbo *ogbaanje* but for other linguistically oriented faithful suffering from *emere* or *abiku* as well. In both the older form of 'cutting' and in charismatic Christian interven-

tions, the putative *ogbaanje* is first requested, then, if recalcitrant, compelled to renounce his or her spiritual companions—usually by finding and surrendering to the diviner a package of special items that symbolizes the *ogbaanje*'s prior agreement with the spirit world.<sup>9</sup> Young people who successfully resist finding this package are considered 'strong' *ogbaanje* and are watched more closely than ever for signs of 'leaving' or death.

In those cases where *ogbaanje* is misdiagnosed (or undiagnosed) until after a barren marriage or a continual refusal to accept a spouse—or where an *ogbaanje* spirit is simply too strong for local divinatory resources—the finding of hidden packages may not be enough to 'cut' the human off from his or her spirit connections. The *ogbaanje* is said to be 'married in' the spirit world; his or her ties are officially recognized as binding, permanent, and rather problematic for the *ogbaanje*'s fully human relatives. (Of course, the trouble that *ndi otu* go to in order to reclaim their straying *ogbaanje* companion for the spirits suggests that spirits are none too keen on human alliances, either.) An uncut *ogbaanje* is neither fish nor fowl; neither fully human nor spirit. Half of his or her loyalty is to the human lineage of his or her birth; the other half remains committed, even if unconsciously committed, to the capricious world of spiritual forces.

This divided loyalty manifests itself in many ways. One young *ogbaanje* of my acquaintance wanted very badly to do well in school, since he was the only son of his father and was expected to achieve at least a secondary education, perhaps even to attend university. Unfortunately, as local diviners discovered, his spirit companions chose to work against this human ambition. The spirits wanted his life on earth to be unpleasant, so he would return to them before the onset of puberty. If he enjoyed school, they decided, he would not be eager to die. The result was that his *ndi otu* danced and sang in front of him whenever he entered a classroom. They waved their fingers before his eyes when he tried to read what was written on the blackboard, and talked loudly in his ear when the teacher asked him a question.

Since he lived in an urban center, young Emeka could not simply leave school and respectably go to farm. His *ogbaanje* condition had, by 1987, forced him to take up the unhappy life of houseboy to one of the very teachers whose classes he found so torturous. Both the teacher and his family agreed that his *ogbaanje* was too strong and that he might not live, but they thought that Emeka's spirit companions might leave him alone for awhile if they found him doing the degrading (to males) work of laundry and housecleaning. In the interim, he was saving money

from employment and his unused school fees to spend in the search for a healer or evangelist who could sever his ties to the spirit world. Emeka's teacher and employer wanted him to begin a course of prayer with a local Catholic prophet, but Emeka's parents were looking for a powerful *dibia* who could communicate with the youth's spirit allies. When I left the field in 1988, nothing was resolved, and Emeka continued to do housework as befits the 'wife' of such an important and difficult kin group.

The interim solution to Emeka's *ogbaanje* problems was, indeed, to acknowledge his status as an affine by having him do the kind of (gendered) work associated with unmarried wives. However equal relations are between spiritual forces while in the spirit world (and there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that spirits arrange themselves hierarchically even there), once a spirit incarnates as an *ogbaanje* child, he or she becomes like an outmarried daughter of an Igbo patrilineage—no longer under the direct control of his or her spirit mates, but not completely beyond their authority, either. This, in its turn, means that an *ogbaanje* child is an anomalous figure in his or her human patrilineage. If the *ogbaanje* chooses to die before marriage and having children—the moments when human personhood is confirmed unequivocally and the possibility of ancestorhood is made manifest—he or she is a 'stranger' within the lineage; the *ogbaanje* has no lasting material or temporal ties to the patriline of his or her birth.<sup>10</sup>

There is, of course, another aspect of the *ogbaanje* problem that should be considered—that fully human and fully spiritual 'persons' (in Igbo, both spirits and humans are said to be *ndi*, people) find themselves allied by their separate but important relations to the incarnated *ogbaanje*. These ties are painful and contradictory, not surprisingly, since they transcend boundaries that are usually maintained with great care, at least on the part of *ndi mmadu* (human beings). Although people told me that some mothers, in defense of their children, would address the invisible *ndi otu* and beg them to leave the *ogbaanje* in peace, most human relatives of *ogbaanje* were uncomfortable with their enforced alliance and would try to ignore what amounted to the strangest of strangers in their familial midst. In some cases, a form of what we might call in-law avoidance took place—with non-*ogbaanje* family members studiously denying the existence of spirits in their household while desperately seeking divinatory assistance for 'cutting' or otherwise eradicating their children's unseen companions.

Since I never was able to speak to *ndi otu* myself, I can only speculate on how spiritual forces regard their attachment to human beings.

Certainly, as noted above, their eagerness to bring incarnate *ogbaanje* back into the spirit world leads me to think that they do not welcome such intimate relations with humans. Alliance between humans and spirits through *ogbaanje* is something of a trial, after all; only one group will be able to claim the *ogbaanje* person in the end. Death, the end of the human life cycle, helps to determine what the *ogbaanje* actually was while incarnate. If he or she dies before puberty, or before 'having issue' (in local English parlance), then the *ogbaanje* returns to its old form as spiritual force. It was never really human; it belongs to a non-human community; it can play its *ogbaanje* tricks again on humanity. If the *ogbaanje* can be convinced to 'stay,' however, he or she can become fully human through marriage, bringing forth children for a human lineage, and taking part in the affairs of his or her human community. At death, the former *ogbaanje* is enrolled in the ranks of the ancestors or human spirits—a fully realized person who has responsibility for the continuance of the lineage and who can eventually reincarnate as another human being. With the stakes so high, little wonder that unwilling human and spirit allies engage in a kind of warfare over and through the bodies of their *ogbaanje* kin. In the next section of the essay, we will consider another form of this embodied spiritual warfare in contemporary southeastern Nigeria: affliction by the spirit known as Mami Wata.

#### *Water Marriage: Mami Wata and Her Kin*

A great deal has been written about the spread of Mami Wata veneration through sub-Saharan Africa. (See, for example, Szombati-Fabian and Fabian 1976; Cole 1982; Salmons 1983; Drewal 1989; Bastian 1991; Gore and Nevadomsky 1991; Masquelier 1992; Kramer 1993.) Most of this material, however, has emphasized the visual component of Mami Wata devotion—focusing in on what we might call Mami Wata style, a syncretic mixture of West African iconography and western commodity fetishism. In this literature, and in parts of West and Central Africa as a whole, the spirit is described in her appearances to humankind as a beautiful woman with 'fair' skin, large compelling eyes, and long hair. Sometimes she is said to have a mermaid's tail; at other times she is seen teetering along on high heels, dressed in the latest of Lagos or Kinshasa fashion. She sometimes appears as a man—no real feat for a spiritual force, who cannot be said to have any biologically determined gender—but is more likely to make herself known as a feminine person. Wherever she appears, however, the spirit tends



to afflict her victims in a most 'modern' way: promising them riches (like fine automobiles, wristwatches and even computers) but usually giving them disease and death when they transgress one of her many prohibitions.

Although I find the material aspects of the rapidly spreading Mami Wata cult(s) fascinating, for the present essay, I am more interested in exploring how Mami Wata and her specifically Igbo corollates—*Nne Mmili* (the water mother), *Ezenwaanyi* (the queen of women), *Nwaanyi mara mma* (the most beautiful woman), and even particular female water forces like Nnobi's Idemmili and Oguta's Uhammiri—fit into the *ogbaanje*/water spouse pattern of strange kin or allies.<sup>11</sup> In southeastern Nigeria during the late 1980s, the spirit afflicted people with her unbounded sexuality and access to the objects that are so much a part of 'modern' urban life, but she was also associated with motherhood and marriage—although not necessarily in ways that played well to the 'ideology of motherhood' that, for example, Amadiume (1987: 69-88) shows to be so important for Nnobi Igbo constructions of sociality.

According to one popular set of tales about Mami Wata in contemporary Nigeria, the powerful water spirit has 'daughters' and 'husbands' in the human population. In another version, the Mami Wata spirit has no recognizable sexuality and takes human spouses indiscriminately, regardless of their gender.<sup>12</sup> In both cases, as we can see, the relation between Mami Wata and human beings is couched in terms of kinship and alliance. But as in the case of incarnated *ndi ogbaanje*, above, these are peculiar kinships and alliances that stretch the proper boundaries between the world of spirits and that of ordinary humans. As suggested above, Mami Wata is an unusual, female *di* (husband/owner) or a potentially deadly *nne* (mother/female authority) in her dealings with humankind, and human beings who are attached to her must tread warily.

The category of 'Mammy water daughter'—to borrow the poetic rendering of one pidgin English novelist (Okoye 1987)—is especially interesting as an example of undeniable but alien kinship. Mami Wata's 'daughters' are human women who resemble local descriptions of the spirit: fair skinned, beautiful, with long, wavy or braided hair and striking, luminous eyes. They must also resemble the spirit in less material ways. A 'mami wata' should be capricious in her relations with men, always flirting but never marrying and producing children; she should love money and luxury goods and demand them from her beaux; she should have an intangible quality, an unsteadiness in her bearing that marks her out as not completely human.<sup>13</sup> The Mami Wata daughter

is seen as an incarnation of the spirit, sent out to tease her human family and their potential human allies with her refusal to enter into marriage and motherhood. She is too attractive, too unusual, 'too much' (as Nigerian pidgin would have it)—she wants only 'to enjoy' or '*-li uwa*' (literally, to eat the world). She is as useless for the larger concerns of the patrilineage as the uncut *ogbaanje* themselves. In fact, a Mami Wata daughter is often known in Igbo as *onye ogbaanje mmili* (water *ogbaanje* person).

Like her less watery relations, the ordinary *ogbaanje*, a Mami Wata daughter is often visited by visions of the world of spirits. She may see the Mami Wata (or Idemmili, or Uhammiri) spirit in her dreams, or she may simply be aware of the presence of undifferentiated *ndi mmili* (water people, spiritual forces associated with bodies of water) around her in the markets and busy streets of urban Nigeria. Unlike ordinary *ogbaanje*, however, the mami wata cannot be easily separated from her *nne* (mother). Although there are ceremonies that diviners and Christian evangelists can and do perform to disrupt the too-intimate relationship between a 'daughter' and her 'mother,' these ceremonies often entail the daughter recognizing and normalizing her spiritual relationship.<sup>14</sup> To make this public recognition, the mami wata takes on a more overt physical representation of what she is inside. She embraces Mami Wata's symbolic attributes and regularly rededicates herself to her spirit mother. Hence, she must wear colors pleasing to the benign aspect of the Mami Wata spirit, white or yellow, and keep one day of the (Igbo or English) week as a day of devotion—when she will not have sex with her human husband or boyfriends and will offer sacrifices and communicate with the spirit exclusively.<sup>15</sup>

A mami wata's human parents, husband, and in-laws must respect this devotion and not interfere with it, lest they offend the spirit. If they do offend her, their own interests in the devotee are unlikely to be fulfilled: she will be barren, impoverished, and very difficult to handle. With the proper acknowledgment and respect shown to her water kin, however, a Mami Wata 'daughter' can offer her natal and marital lineages beauty (*mma*, which in Igbo also means goodness and wealth) and access to the power over money and material goods associated with the spirit. In her person, the placated mami wata can thus domesticate the relationship between a potentially dangerous spiritual force and her human relatives; the benefit of having Mami Wata's attention can be partially separated from its perils. It can never be fully separated, however. Mami Wata daughters rarely have large families. Some of my informants believed that the few children given to such 'daughters'

would be female, as well. Although female children are a valued resource for Igbo patrilineages, remaining members of their natal lineages even after marriage, this is still a patrilineal society where boy children are most highly prized. (For an eloquent evocation of the difficulties attendant on having a mother in the water, see Flora Nwapa's 1966 novel *Efuru*.) Nonetheless, the recognized and placated *mami wata* stands a good chance of being a productive woman; probably luckier at trade than at childbirth, but a useful person nonetheless and likely to become a powerful female ancestral force after death.

In contrast to this possible outcome—a balanced alliance achieved *through* a person with recognized kin ties to a spiritual force—we must place the problem of 'water marriage.' People who are married in the water cannot call on the proverbial (throughout West Africa) affection between mothers and their children to mediate their relations with the spirit world. They must rely on the altogether more tension-fraught relation between *di* (husband/owner) and spouse. People who are married in the water are never in a strong position in relation to their 'spouse.' Their spirit husbands and 'wives' may give them money, educational or trading success, and otherworldly sexual experiences, but the human spouse cannot demand any of these gifts. Nor can the human spouse set any schedule for his or her receipt of the gifts; they arrive (or not) purely on the whim of the water spouse. The relationship between water and human spouses is therefore always asymmetrical and couched in the same hierarchical terms that characterize Igbo patriarchal ideologies of human gender relations: ownership, enclosure, and a requirement for deference from the subordinate spouse. (Which is why I put 'wives' in quotation marks, above. It would be closer to the truth to say that Mami Wata acts towards men as a female husband.)

The difference in water marriage from ordinary Igbo marriage, of course, is that both men and women experience Mami Wata (or her local variants) as a *di*. As a spirit, she controls powers and resources that are ordinarily not available to her spouses; even to those of her spouses raised with societal expectations of gender dominance. But possibly because Igbo-speaking men and women have differing expectations and experience of marriage in general, male and female spouses often have quite opposed reactions to their water marriage. I certainly do not mean by this that women accept water marriage passively while men always fight against its strictures. Women are often the most activist in seeking out a compromise with the spirit, going from diviner to evangelist in search of relief from the condition of barrenness and inability to marry in the human world. It is men married to *ndi mmili* (water

spirits), however, who find themselves in the position of greatest structural contradiction. Many of the stories told to me about men with water spouses ended tragically, when the men in question were unable to reconcile their need to establish themselves in patrilineal Igbo society with the demands of their spiritual alliance. Let me include a representative tale, as reported on the front page of the Anambra State newspaper, *The Daily Star*:

### *Bridegroom Commits Suicide*

It was a tragic end of a marriage ceremony, at Umunze in Aguata local government area of Anambra State, over the weekend, when a 30-year old bridegroom committed suicide, on the eve of his traditional marriage ceremony.

The man from Umucheke quarters of Ururo village, Umunze, had on the fateful Saturday morning, given his elder brother some 1500 naira [Nigerian currency, then exchanging at a rate of 3 naira: 1 US dollar] being the bride price he intended paying during the ceremony. The elder brother, in expressing his happiness over the marriage, asked his deceased younger brother to keep back his money and that as he was taking a position as the father, he would pay the bride price.

Arrangement concluded, the deceased went to take his bath while his friends who would accompany him to the bride's house waited.

As the man stayed longer at the 'bathroom,' the people forced the door open only to find the man hanging from the top of the roof.

'Daily Star' also gathered that, at the time of this discovery, the bride's family had concluded their own arrangements to welcome the suitor and his relations.

Some elders who spoke to the 'Star' alleged that the deceased had been warned against the marriage because he had a wife of 'mermaid' contracted inside the water before his birth, but the man's relations did not believe. Also, his mother who owns a spiritual church in the area had allegedly assured the son of deliverance from the 'mermaid.'

It was also gathered that the man went insane when he attempted to marry some years ago. He was cured but the marriage negotiations collapsed.

—'Our Correspondent,' *Daily Star* (Nov. 16, 1987)

This version of the male water marriage story is interesting for several reasons; notably that it combines elements of local, patrilineal culture (the interchange between senior and junior brother) with newer social and religious arrangements (the suicide's mother 'owns' a spiritual church and purports to exercise control over mermaids).<sup>16</sup> In the first part of the story, the would-be bridegroom demonstrates his responsibility to his lineage senior by offering to pay a large sum of bridewealth. Considering what is revealed about his previous problems with marriage in the last paragraph, this gesture is not an empty one; it denotes a commitment to go through with the marriage for its own sake as well as for that of the lineage. The senior brother ('taking a position as the father') returns his younger brother's contribution and insists

upon paying the bridewealth himself; showing that the marriage is of corporate, not only individual interest. It is also a token of corporate confidence in the ability of a lineage mate to get on successfully with the important business of marriage and the extension of the patrilineal compound. This is surely important, since we know that the younger brother has not been able to fulfill these lineage obligations previously. His elder brother is not only acting *in loco parentis* but telling his sibling that he is willing to display his confidence in the marriage before their (possibly nervous) future in-laws.<sup>17</sup>

This confidence, as we see, is misplaced. Suicide is considered by Igbo-speaking peoples to be one of three unforgivable *nso ani* (abominations against the earth), along with wilful murder and stealing. Suicide is a shameful, public death that pollutes the entire lineage—necessitating, in the past, the destruction of the patrilineage compound and other property, as well as exile for lineage members. Hanging himself in the ‘bathroom’ is especially evocative: the erring ‘wife’ of a water spirit kills himself during his last connection with water and purification, just before he is to betray his mermaid with a human woman.

Whether he ‘met’ the spirit in the bathroom when he poured out water in a basin—one of the ways that diviners ‘call’ Mami Wata into the world of human beings—or whether his impending state as ‘wife’ to a powerful spirit and husband to a human wife was simply too much of a contradictory one to bear, he was evidently forced into taking the tragic step. I rather think it was the poetic quality of the suicide (and the mermaid’s revenge) that earned the story its front page status in the *Daily Star*. Instead of becoming ritually purified and prepared to step into one of the most important roles of an Igbo man, helping to extend the lineage through time and space, the bridegroom became *nso* (abominable) and effectively ended his participation in any lineage future. A suicide cannot become an ancestral force; in an older era, his body would be taken out and placed by strangers in *ofia ojoo*, ‘the bad bush,’ to decay ignominiously with other evil objects and bodies. Although his Christianity might save him from this fate in late 1980s Nigeria, his body would still be treated without the respect accorded to that of a person who had died married and who could be buried properly by his wife and (especially) his children. And, as we have seen, his death could not even be kept private, but became a public spectacle for traders to talk about in the Onitsha and Enugu marketplaces—and for anthropologists to write about, as well.

One fascinating twist to the suicidal bridegroom’s tale is the importance of women in his life and death. It seems that he is caught between

two spiritual forces: his mermaid spouse and his evangelical mother. In some sense, the story is really about two women—one a human, the other a spiritual force—testing their powers against each other through the person of a young man. I have argued elsewhere (Bastian 1992, chapter 3) that young men in contemporary Igbo society are often caught and used as pawns in esoteric battles waged by (usually male) elders, but there is another, well-known Igbo familial conflict echoed here—that between mother and daughter-in-law.

As in most patrilineal societies where wives remain 'strangers' in their husband's lineage, a good deal of a woman's power in Igbo must be exercised either through her husband or her sons. Since husbands may have several wives or unofficial female spouses, maintaining control over a son can be less taxing than trying to hold sway over a fickle spouse. And, of course, the ideology of deference to husbands requires Igbo-speaking women to exercise great subtlety and tact in imposing their wills over those of their spouses. Controlling a son is both simpler and more rewarding over time; the husband is likely to die, and his authority can pass to his wife's male children. But there is always a potential fly in the mother's carefully tended ointment. The person who most threatens uterine authority is the daughter-in-law, the new woman/stranger in the lineage compound with a vested interest in the older woman's son. In the case above, where the daughter-in-law is a powerful, capricious spiritual force (and not even a girl who could be bullied or cajoled into submission), she offers more of a threat to her mother-in-law than might usually be expected.

The mother and daughter-in-law struggle covertly outlined in the newspaper article was, perhaps, more grim than most—after all, we are told that the young man was married in the water 'before birth,' that he was, in effect, an *ogbaanje mmili*. His mother was thus faced with a mature and dangerous daughter-in-law almost before she had solidified her own position in her marital household, much less in her son's emotional life. The newspaper account is not detailed enough to give us the mother's biography, but I would not be surprised to learn that her interest in spiritual churches dated from the time when she discovered that her child had contracted a water marriage. Certainly she had every motivation not only to embrace charismatic Christianity but to master its secrets: her hold over an important part of her uterine family depended on it.

Towards the end of her son's life, she was even willing to take on a human female rival—encouraging her son to marry outside of the water—in the (losing) battle against her mermaid in-law. This, too, has

its precedents in the annals of Igbo mothering, since an upstart daughter-in-law can often be deflated by bringing in a younger wife. Several women of my acquaintance in the late 1980s found their marital positions of power subverted by a clever, matchmaking mother-in-law.<sup>18</sup> Mami Wata and her kin are not so easily diminished, however. After driving her human spouse mad in punishment for the first offense—but then evidently relenting and allowing him to be ‘cured’—the spirit took more direct action on the second. Dying before he could marry or sire children, the young bridegroom was separated out forever from his lineage; he cannot reincarnate as a human being; he becomes a wild, troublesome spirit who can never be satisfied. In short, he becomes more like his *onye mmili* (water spirit) wife and is lost to his mother (and his patriline) permanently.

This *Daily Star* story was much discussed in the Onitsha markets where I did my fieldwork. The consensus among youthful male traders who make up the majority population in the market system was that the suicidal bridegroom ‘did well’ in trying to escape from his water spouse—but that his family was wrong to disbelieve in the mermaid’s power. People working in markets are thought particularly susceptible to spiritual influence, since spiritual forces are drawn to the marketplace, and these traders believed very firmly in the existence of seductive mami watas and unquiet human ghosts.<sup>19</sup> They had little difficulty in believing that a man’s water marriage was bound to conflict with his duties to his lineage and family life. After all, those who married to suit themselves in urban Onitsha were often accused of bringing in to their own lineages, at the very least, bad influences—and sometimes dangerous witches or spirit wives. Those traders divorced or separated from their ‘city wives’ were sometimes unsure whether their town elders (or mothers) were not correct in the assessment. At any rate, they had all experienced the desire of ‘modern girls’ for luxury goods, money, and monogamy (or sexual exclusiveness), and they equated that modernity with peril. Young male traders saw the world as being full of potential mermaids, and they took the newspaper account’s lessons to heart: men caught up in the battles of women rarely profit. Even male kin solidarity cannot secure male fortune when the ‘strangers’ in their midst begin to make trouble.

### *Some Conclusions*

In contemporary Nigeria, the oldest contradictions of exogamy are wedded to the most modern dilemmas of urban living: how do you incorporate into your kin-group the increasingly strange ‘strangers’ you

must marry and ally yourself with? As Igbo-speaking peoples see their world marketplace as more and more a part of the capitalist world system, they are realizing that previously very intimate boundaries like family, lineage, and locale have become more permeable. Commodities and bodies, information and personalities from previously unknown places of the world are circulating through their lives and living spaces—and inevitably, some of those commodities, bodies, information sources, and personalities take up more permanent residence. That being the case, they must be dealt with, not merely reacted to.

A few people in southeastern Nigeria told me that *ogbaanje* and *mami watas* were more numerous than ever before; that they were experiencing a veritable plague of spirits. I would not like to diminish these very real experiences in any way by suggesting that the spiritual forces are only symbolic in nature, a way for people to think about their problems in a more abstract fashion. Having witnessed the suffering of *ndi ogbaanje* and how accusations of water marriage can affect young people's life expectations, it is not possible to believe that these are only abstractions or mystifications for the people involved.

Nonetheless, there is something compelling about how the discourse of spirit/human interaction relies on metaphors of kinship and alliance. In the grip of powerful feelings of alterity and thinking that their lives are out of control, Igbo-speaking people turn to the foundations of their social experience to socialize and connect with these others. Kinship is familiar as both a comfort and a discomfort—and, as such, offers a discursive space where ambiguous relations can be played out and made figures for creative play. Perhaps what can help draw together such disparate worlds as those of spirit and humanity can help explain and knit up, for the Igbo, some of their fractured experience(s) of modernity as well.

## NOTES

1. On *zar*, see Boddy 1989, Constantinides 1977 and Lewis 1989 (1971); for Nigerian *bori*, see Masquelier, 1993.

2. The fieldwork this article is based on was accomplished, during 1987-88, with the assistance of an IIE Fulbright Scholarship. Dissertation support came from a 1989-90 Charlotte Newcombe Fellowship.

3. In some cases, the child is simply called *Ogbaanje*—letting it know that its secret is uncovered. In other cases, it might be given names suggesting its importance to the family or its special status.

4. Anene Ejikeme (personal communication) suggests that *ndi otu* should more properly be seen as members of a spiritual age-grade, since the term *otu* (meeting) is used to describe age groups in Igbo-speaking areas. Nonetheless, the spirit *otu* acts more like a lineage than an age-grade in its desire to keep members exclusively for itself. That



being the case, I will continue to use the notion of 'kin' above for *ndi otu*, while taking Ejikeme's point. Spirit kin might very well be *laterally* organized, since the spirit world always runs counter to ordinary human behavior.

5. Marriage here being seen not only as a corporate commitment between lineages but also as a larger corporate commitment to the extension of human kind. Interestingly, Igbo-speaking peoples see the spirit world and the human world in some competition over population: the spirits become 'envious' if they see humankind multiplying too quickly.

6. It is difficult to talk about spirit-human relations from the point of view of spiritual forces—since many non-Igbo would find it difficult to believe that spirits *have* a point of view—but possession by the flesh, by the physical facts of humanity, seems to be the greatest danger for spirits in this interaction.

7. *Chi*, sometimes thought to be a guardian spirit in Igbo, is a complicated subject and one that I will not go into here in any depth. Let it suffice to say, in this context, that an Igbo person ordinarily has a *chi*—and that this spirit being, or part, enters into contractual relations with the person. They are said to 'agree' when human life is proceeding successfully and to 'disagree' when it is not. Since *ogbaanje* are not (yet) part of the cycle of reincarnation, it is not clear that they would have 'met their *chi*' in the prebirth world and made a life-pact with it.

8. But see Achebe, 1986 for the most complete account of *ogbaanje* 'traditional' healing and consultation.

9. The packages are known as *iyi-uwa*, literally an 'oath of the world.' Interestingly, *iyi* (oath, binding) also, according to Williamson (1977: 189), means water from a stone. There is obviously some poetic association between the largely water spirits and their 'stone' (the *ogbaanje*) invoked in the name of the oathing bundle. These bundles are cleverly hidden, often buried at the base of a tree (like a regular human child's umbilical cord). The *ogbaanje* may disavow any knowledge of such a package, but he or she will inevitably be led to it by the spiritual knowledge of the healer/diviner. According to a friend who underwent the 'cutting' ceremony at puberty, her package contained some feathers, a tiny piece of red cloth, and a small stone wrapped in leaves. Still skeptical about her diagnosis several years after the ceremony, she claimed to me that the *onye dibia* 'must have put that thing there. I never saw it before. Why would I want dirty things like that?'

10. The most obvious 'strangers' in exogamous Igbo patrilineages are unmarried wives, who may prove to be barren, die in childbirth, or divorce before becoming pregnant. Although the important conduits of alliance, these wives are never really part of their husbands' lineages. They retain important ritual and political powers in their natal lineages, however, and are usually taken back in death for burial (a literal reincorporation) in their natal towns.

11. See Amadiume 1987 for a full discussion of Nnobi's premier deity, Idemmili, and Sabine Jell-Bahlsen's fine film, 'Mammy Water: In Search of the Water Spirits in Nigeria' for more about Oguta's Uhammiri/Ogbiude. Oguta's lake deity is also one of the main characters in Flora Nwapa's 1966 novel *Efuru*.

12. Describing her experience of Mami Wata to me, a young devotee told me that Mami Wata (who the devotee nonetheless referred to as 'Mami,' mother/woman in pidgin English, and 'she') is 'a kind of a thing. She has no prick, she has no *yansh* [genitals in pidgin].' This young woman considered herself to be unwillingly married in the water, after encountering the spirit at a local stream. Because she is a Mami Wata spouse, she has not married; although she had a steady stream of male friends during 1987-88, no permanent alliance seemed likely.

13. My Nigerian friends were wont to call such young women 'mami watas,' or smaller versions (avatars) of 'the big one.' I follow southern Nigerian linguistic practice here. When capitalized, I am referring to 'the big one,' the spiritual force herself; otherwise her 'daughters' are being discussed.

14. The famous charismatic Catholic priest, Father Edeh, reserved some of his most vitriolic rhetoric for these 'Mami Wata daughters.' He did not want to appease the Mami Wata spirit, only to cast her out as a most dangerous demon. Furthermore, he used the name Mami Wata to cast aspersions against one of his emerging female rivals in charismatic Catholic practice—a laywoman known as 'Sister Kate' whose devotions to the Virgin Mary supposedly resulted in the power of healing through prayer. Sister Kate told me during an interview that Father Edeh spearheaded her excommunication from the Church, preaching to his followers (and telling the Catholic hierarchy in private) that she was a mami wata who was luring souls into damnation with her prophecies and private visions of the Virgin.

15. Not everyone sees this embrace of Mami Wata's symbols as a positive thing, however. In a similar story to that of Father Edeh and Sister Kate above, Birgit Meyer (1995: 19) gives us an example of a young mami wata who is stripped of her jewelry and finery in a Ghanaian evangelical church in an attempt to exorcise the spirit. Evidently the spirit fails to respond to this treatment, and the young woman demands the return of her necklace and other adornments at the end of the service. The pastor eventually does return the objects, informing Meyer that 'by adorning themselves young women risk devoting themselves to this dangerous spirit which would later prevent them from finding a husband and giving birth. The fact that he returned the jewelry to the girl indicates that he did not consider her to be successfully delivered. He thought that she would continue to behave as before and thus be called forward for treatment for some time to come.'

16. Mami Wata is often depicted in the iconography as a mermaid. Because of this, speakers of Nigerian English tend to refer to Mami Wata or, indeed, to any water spirit as a mermaid.

17. 'Traditional' ceremonies, also known in Nigerian English as 'wine-carryings,' do not generally take place unless the personal histories and family connections of both parties have been thoroughly investigated. A young man who has 'gone insane' at a previous wedding would not look to be the best possible candidate for alliance. We may speculate that a good deal of negotiation that is not discussed in the newspaper account must have occurred before the wine-carrying could go forward.

18. An African-American woman I knew in Port Harcourt became an unknowing senior wife in her own household when her mother-in-law brought her a new 'maid' to help out after the birth of a child. Some months later the maid was revealed to be pregnant as well—and maid, husband, and mother-in-law confessed that the mother-in-law paid the 'maid's' bridewealth before her 'employment' began.

19. *Afia*, or the Igbo marketplace, is the most open of spaces. Igbo-speaking peoples think that everyone and everything in the world eventually passes through their markets, and, indeed, the whole world may be thought of as a marketplace. One consequence of this understanding of the market's importance is that humans who frequent the markets inevitably come in contact with spirits. Spirits 'can't make things,' as one trader explained to me, but they are attracted to the things created by human beings—as well as by the spectacle of human life itself. They come to the marketplace to buy, steal, and barter with their human counterparts; they also come simply to watch people going about their business.

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