

EZE MMIRI DI EGWU, THE WATER MONARCH IS AWESOME

Reconsidering the Mammy Water Myths

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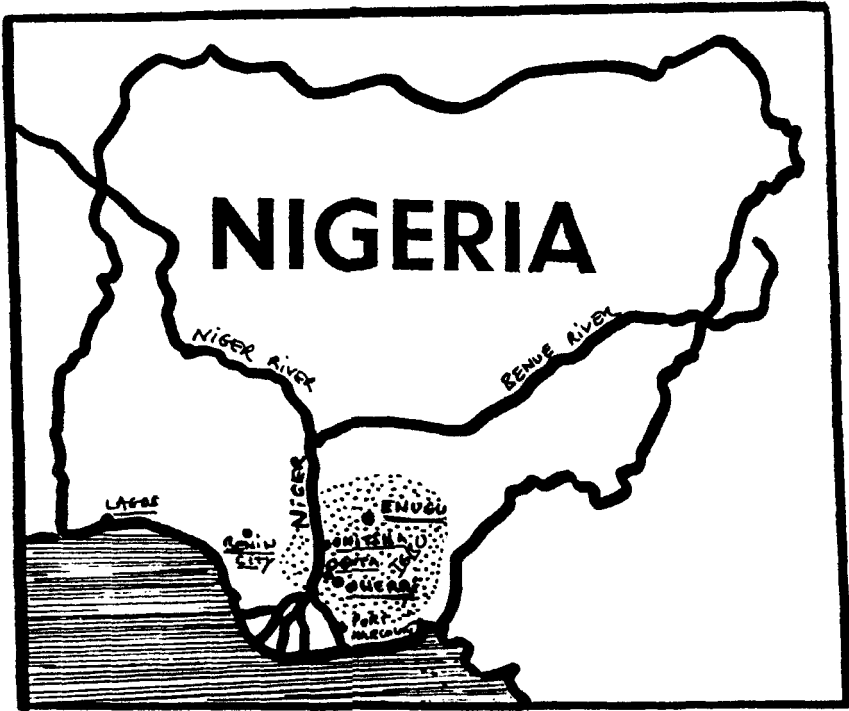
About 20 million Igbo (Ibo) live in southeastern Nigeria, a country of approximately 100 million people. Their language belongs to the Kwa-Niger group and has several sub-dialects. The group on which my study is based is mostly limited to the Oru-Igbo. The Oru live in a group of hierarchically related towns along the Oguta (Ugwuta) Lake and the Njaba, Urash and other tributaries of the Niger River. They refer to themselves as riverine Igbo. Oguta is their administrative center, today, the biggest and most well-known town. Orsu-Obodo is their most senior town.

The precolonial economy of the Oru was based primarily on farming, fishing and trading. The staples are still yam and cassava and the diet is supplemented by plantains, rice, a variety of beans, vegetables, palm oil, fish, small game, goats, sheep, poultry and cow meat. Waterways are an important means of local transportation for people, materials, produce, and trade.

Oru society, like other subgroups of Igbo is patrilineal, but in pre-colonial times, there were parallel male and female institutions. The patrilineages own the land and run the towns' external and internal affairs. Today there are a number of other groups, secret societies, trade associations, Mammy Water societies, and traditional age-grades.

The Oru trace their origin to Benin, having migrated over 10 generations ago. The Obi bears the title of Eze Igwe, sometimes translated as "divine king." However, his office is quite different from that of the Oba of Benin, the Oru being an essentially egalitarian society (Jell-Bahlsen 1980).

IN WEST AFRICA, *Mammy Water* is the pidgin-English name given to the popular image of a woman with long hair and snakes, as seen on a chromolithograph poster imported into Nigeria from Germany in 1926. The poster was originally designed of an Indian



Map of Nigeria, showing the rivers Niger and Benue, the Niger delta, the approximate location of Igbo land, and the cities and towns of Lagos, Benin City, Enugu, Port Harcourt, Onitsha, Owerri, and Oguta.

Goddess, by an unknown artist (FIG. 1). It is locally identified with water deities, notably in and around the Igbo town of Oguta.

This imported poster has been used, reprinted, and copied locally, over and over again, which has given rise to various interpretations by outside scholars.

Taking their clues directly from the obviously foreign influences in the iconography of Mammy Water, its history, and impact on local artists, art historians following Jill Salmons's (1977) earlier observations have speculated on the possible foreign origins of the Goddess herself and her "cults." Within art history, this view has been explored by the important and groundbreaking work of Henry Drewal (1988a, 1988b; Drewal and Pemberton 1989; Drewal and Drewal 1990). Other authors have drawn Western psychological associations from the image of a "woman with snakes."

As an anthropologist, my concern is with the cultural context of Mammy Water, rather than with the Judeo-Christian meanings of

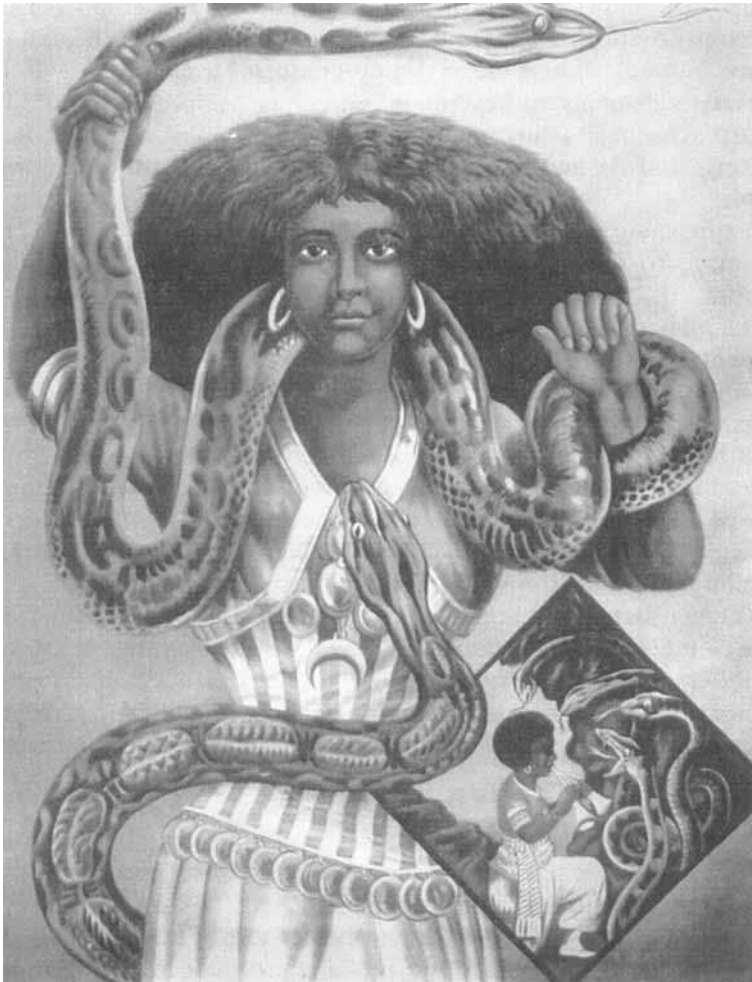


FIGURE 1 The poster, popularly known as “Mammy Water” in West Africa. (Chromolithograph, Germany ca. 1926, by an unknown artist.)

images and objects, with objects and ritual performances used in association with this deity. In my view, the Norwegian origin of the wool hat worn by the Mammy Water priestess and her assistant’s attaché case, her Indian looks and ritual paraphernalia, are of minor significance, compared with the local meanings.

In the ethnographic context, it is evident from first-hand observations, local myths, and interviews with the culture bearers that Mammy Water is firmly rooted in Igbo religion and cosmology. She has

a particular significance 1) in relation to both female empowerment and compensation; 2) as a local strategy for dealing with the extraordinary, unpredictable, abnormal, non-conformist, challenging and/or innovative elements and events in nature, e.g., unpredictable floods, women who bear twins, men with dreadlocks (and a foreign field-worker); and 3) and as a complex concept of multi-dimensional divinity.

In a fresh attempt to unravel the Mammy Water myths, I will relate the image to other levels of Igbo precolonial social organization, economy, the environment, perceptions of gender, female empowerment, and notions of divinity (Balogun 1978; Speed and Horton 1978; Jell-Bahlsen 1991). My views are based on first hand observations, interviews, *etc.*, and include recordings and videos made in and around Oguta, 1978–1992 (Jell-Bahlsen 1980, 1988c, 1995a, 1996, 1997; Films 1991, 1994; Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1981, 1982).

In addition, I found an amazing coherence between the testimonies of local informants, and the literary works of prominent members of Igbo culture: Chinua Achebe, Chinwe Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Catherine Acholonu, and Elechi Amadi, to name only a few.

In Oguta, Mammy Water's local name is *Ogbuide*, or *Uhammiri*. She is the Goddess of Oguta lake. Like the Goddess herself, her priestesses are addressed, *Eze Mmiri* (water monarch). The Goddess's male priests, like her husband(s), are known as *Eze Ugo* (crowned king(s)). Her devotees are the *Ndi Mmiri* (water people) (Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1982).

THE ICON

The popular print of Mammy Water (1926) is my starting-point. Why has this particular image become so popular in West Africa generally, and particularly among the Igbo?

Certain elements link this foreign poster to pre-existing Igbo cosmology and religious beliefs and probably account for its becoming a powerful icon. These elements are a woman, a pair of pythons, the color white, a combination of red and white, and long, uncut hair. These elements send important messages about precolonial gender relations. Many of the Mammy Water priest(esse)s are women, as are the majority of their followers.

In the popular chromolithograph, Mammy Water is a woman handling two big snakes. Because of their patterns and their appearance as a pair, local informants immediately identify these snakes as royal pythons. In addition, an insert in the lower right corner shows a man playing the flute to four smaller snakes. The number four is associated with the female side of the universe, and with the four days of the Igbo women's market week.

The combination of “woman” and “snake” has led to interpretations rooted in Western psychology. Ronald Wintrob (1970), a Canadian psychologist who worked in a Liberian mental hospital, observed that his patients were “worried by Mammy Water.” He interpreted this to mean that they had suppressed Oedipal desires, resulting in feelings of guilt and other emotional problems.

A social anthropologist, Johannes Fabian (1978), interpreted the popular Mammy Water paintings of a “white woman” with long hair, snakes, a wrist watch, mirror, and fish tail, in a dry upland part of Zaire to mean “suppressed sexual desires.” He did not make possible connections to a local myth of a crocodile woman, *Mamba Muntu*. Taking a socio-psychological position Fabian saw Mammy Water representatives as the “suppressed desire for the forbidden white woman,” and by extension, “forbidden desire for the unattainable wealth of the white man” (Rouche 1955; Frank 1995; Wendl and Wiese 1988; Kramer 1983).

Both regarded Mammy Water as an expression of emotional problems. Her worshippers and some African writers attest to the Goddess’s healing powers, benevolence, beauty, mystery, and local origins.

The Igbo celebrate procreation as a source of life. The union of man and woman, and children are regarded as positive, as the basis of human life and continued existence, rather than as loss of paradise. A new life is always welcome: children are wealth and joy. This is expressed in the Igbo name, “*Kego*” short for “*Nwa ka ego*” (child is better than money). Procreation is an extension of creation, is an expression of divine power. Robert F. Thompson (1983) describes one of the manifestations of the divine force, *asbe* of the Yoruba, in a snake’s zig-zag line.

Among the Igbo, a zig-zag line representing the crocodile appears on the stool of titled elders, on altars and shrines, and on the priestess’s red and white costume.

Crocodiles are the water Goddess’s favorite children, and like the tortoise, taboo to the people around Oguta lake. In local myth, the killing of a crocodile is avenged by the python. Coiled up in a spiral, the python, just as the rings growing in an elephant’s or ram’s tusk, stands for growth and continuous life. When the priestess is blowing her tusk she is calling on the Goddess, asking for life (FIG. 2).

On a woman’s kitchen door, the serpent’s concentric circles symbolize birth, death and re-incarnation, the indestructible soul, and the eternal cycle of time. A chalk circle drawn by the Eze Ugo, Owu Mmiri, Palmer, a Mammy Water healer-priest, represents the python and is a symbol of death (Jell-Bahlsen 1991).



FIGURE 2 The "Eze Mmiri" (Water Monarch), a priestess of Ogbuide/Uhammiri/Mammy Water, the Goddess of Oguta Lake. She is performing a ritual on the water and blowing a little ivory tusk. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Orsu-Obodo 1988.)

The snake, which rejuvenates itself by shedding its skin, is also associated with continuity and life, and, like women, it is associated with the mobility and fluidity of water.

Among most Igbo, the python is regarded as mysterious and immortal, inspiring both fear and admiration. All deities can assume the shape of a python. Therefore, carved pythons adorn an antique Igbo war-drum. Pythons are said to encircle their victims just as an enemy encircles a village in war. Unlike other wild animals, pythons live in pairs. A trapper who accidentally catches a python, may be attacked by the creature's spouse. The non-poisonous royal python and her aquatic sister are sacred and are frequently sculpted, carved, painted, or used as a decorative element, often in combination with a tortoise, or crocodile.

These animals, above all the python, have meaning and taboos attached to them.

Parrinder (*African Mythology* 1967) gives many examples of "The Serpent of Eternity." Among most Igbo groups, the python is sacred and is not to be killed. If it is accidentally killed, it must be buried like a human being with white chalk. Known as gentle creatures, even as pets, pythons are also believed to wreak vengeance on behalf of the Gods. An example is found in the chapter entitled "Idemmili," after a local water Goddess, in Chinua Achebe's book, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987).

As a messenger, a manifestation of the High God, and of lesser divinities, the python symbolizes divine power representing the eternal circle of life and death. These may be naturalistic, geometric, or abstract representations of pythons: the zig-zag line of divine power expressing life force, and the eternal circle of birth, death and re-birth.

Pythons, like Mammy Water, are both admired and feared for their beauty. The presence of pythons on the foreign poster conveys these powerful meanings. It is not a Freudian symbol of sexuality and repression. In this perspective, Mammy Water's pythons assert her divine powers over life and death, embodied in the water Goddess.

THE COLOR WHITE

Africans sometimes say that Mammy Water is "white," or "yellow," and that she is "very beautiful." Some of her sculptures are painted pink, a color also used for Europeans (Wicker n.d.; Wendl and Wiese 1988; Kramer 1983).

This led the film makers, Wendl and Wiese (1988), to the assumption that Evhe Mammy Water adepts in Togo literally worship "*The Spirit of the White Woman*." But, in contrast to the film makers' narrated views, Ajo, one of the priestesses interviewed on film, authorita-

tively describes her work, as teaching her clients dancing, and healing through reconciliation with their own traditions and custom.

“The white woman” seen in the icon contains two components: *white* and *divine woman*. These elements have specific meanings in the Igbo context, differing from European connotations. The light skin of Mammy Water must not be mistaken for a racial feature. Mammy Water’s “whiteness” is a metaphorical indicator of her mysterious qualities, and of spirit involvement; her “whiteness” is like that of a newborn baby, or of a dying person; it is beautiful, mysterious, and awesome at the same time.

Among the Igbo, the color white signals transition from life to death and vice versa, in the eternal cycle of life, death and re-birth. It also means communication with the spirit world.

The color white manifests itself in the form of white limestone, found underwater, and called *nzu* in Igbo, or “chalk” in English. It is used for marking the transitions, borderlines, and crossroad between human life and the spirit world. As R. N. Henderson observed in Onitsha (1972), white chalk is like food for the spirits. It is used in ritual, when addressing the ancestors and other deities. White chalk signals dedication to, and communication with, the spirit world.

A priest’s eyes are painted with white chalk (FIG. 3). So is the front head of the priestess, in touch with the spirit world.

White chalk is used to cool the possessed mind, and also, the feverish body. The ephemeral white element is found underwater, and sometimes supplemented with white powder. It disperses like women leaving their ancestral home. Both water and whiteness are associated with childbirth, female fertility and mobility. In rituals of birth, humans are painted with white “chalk.”

But, the color white is also associated with death. Kinswomen attending a funeral ceremony are wearing white, and again, white chalk is used for marking the corpse.

A color marking both, birth and death, white chalk delineates circular time and the transitions from one life stage into another. Used in initiation ceremonies involving ritual death and re-birth, for marking the body, blown to the deities, sprinkled on the ground in prayers, and in drawing sacred symbols, white chalk generally indicates spirit involvement.

With white chalk, Mammy Water worshippers skillfully blend artistic expression and religious belief. Worshippers of the Goddess *Ogbuide* must wear white in ritual (FIG. 4).

White (chalk) is a gift of the water goddess, *Ogbuide*. It is also her favorite color and she prefers white animals or ones with at least a white head, in sacrifice.



FIGURE 3 The semi-sacred Obi/Eze of Orsu-Obodo and his (first) wife, posing like a divine pair. The Obi's eyes are painted with white chalk because he "sees" and communicates with the spirit world. He wears a privileged red dress and red hat with a blue coil and large white and red feathers pointing down. He carries an elephant tusk and holds the special Oji iron rattle staff with which he beats the ground, when on an official outing. His necklace is of leopard teeth. The Obi and his (first) wife, other titled elders and the water priestess and her co-priest were the only persons posing as pairs in public, during my first stay in 1978/9. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Orsu-Obodo 1979.)



FIGURE 4 "Otu Eze Nwanyi" the group of Mummy Water worshippers assembled around the priestess, "the Eze Mmiri" and her assistant, "the Eze Ugo." They are wearing T-shirts with the "Ogouide" imprints, one name for Oguta lake, also Mummy Water's local name. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen 1979.)

The Goddess herself can appear to man or woman in the form of a python, in sparkling white, black, or displaying different shades and colors, like the rainbow, or in an etching by the artist, Twin 77, entitled, "The Rainbow Goddess" (see also Wendl and Wiese 1988; Wicker n.d.).

She can also appear as a human being of any color, shape, and age (Jell-Bahlsen 1991). In the popular poster, her blue and white dress, as well as the turquoise part of the background, is locally perceived as white. White and turquoise-blue are one, associated with coolness and as such, interchangeable. To those who know, the icon's whiteness indicates a *female spirit being from the water*.

RED AND WHITE

The white color's ritual significance appears not only as pure white, but also in combination with the color red. Just as white chalk, *nzu*, stands for femininity, borderlines between spirits and humans, and the transition points between life and death, yellow chalk, *edo*, called "red," just as red blood, red kola, and red cloth, stands for life force and virility (Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1981).

The combination of red and white in ritual is an expression of the complementary dualism of male and female, of their joint procreative power, of balance, and of the divine force of creation, symbolized in the zig-zag line. The balanced power of male and female is expressed in a shrine for the water Goddess, Ava, and her husband of undetermined name, near Nsukka (FIG. 5).

In the popular Mammy Water print, the color red may not be as obvious. But to the initiate, it is there, in the red part of the woman's costume, and in the yellow half of the background. To those who know, the color red is interchangeable with yellow, just as blue and white are interchangeable.

Red is present in all Mammy Water rituals, in combination with the color white. This contrast stands for procreation and life (Jell-Bahlsen 1991).

Seven chalk strokes are drawn by the priestess for the water deities' seven children: three for her sons, four for her daughters.

Emphasizing the necessity of balance between male and female, Mammy Water worshippers use two matching images: one female, one male (FIG. 6). A three-headed Indian deity represents the local water Goddess's husband (FIG. 7).

LONG HAIR

One striking feature of the female Mammy Water is her long, uncut, and wavy hair. Foreign interpretations read racial features into this hair style.



FIGURE 5 A shrine of a divine pair representing the river Goddess, Ava, and her husband at Ukana, in Enugu State. On the sculptures' lower left side we can see the number one (1) drawn with chalk on the female's right leg and the number two (2) drawn on the male's right leg. Women pray to the river Goddess for children, stay at the river, bathing and drinking its water for three months and making offerings at this shrine in appreciation of their pregnancy. This fertility Goddess and her spouse are honored in a communal annual festival at the shrine. Painted mud sculptures by unknown artist(s). (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, 1978.)

But in West Africa, unkempt and uncut "long hair" has its own specific meaning. Here, the head is regarded as perhaps the most significant part of the human body. Among the Mende, Igbo and Yoruba, a person's front head is associated with his or her destiny (see Boone 1986; Drewal and Pemberton 1989; Drewal and Drewal 1990). Great care is applied to coiffure and hairstyling as an intrinsic part of personal grooming. Igbo hairstyles are highly developed and diverse (see Houlberg 1979; Sagay 1983).

Coiffures are carefully carved in Igbo classic art and even today, hairstyles form an intrinsic part of ideals of both, feminine beauty and male grooming.

In precolonial African art, human beings are normally represented as well-balanced, composed and with well groomed hair. There are very few instances of images of human beings with wild, long or unkempt hair. Long hair is unusual; it signals uncontrolled beauty,



FIGURE 6 Palmer, the “Eze Ugo” (King with an eagle feather), or “Owu Mmiri,” a Mammy Water priest of the river God, Amadi Onye Nze, in Egbema. He also serves Ogbuide. Here, Palmer dances with images of the divine pair of water deities, during a regular ritual session for Amadi Oha on an Orié Ukwu (every second Orié) evening. The water deities are represented by two imported chromolithographs, the well-known Mammy Water print representing the lake Goddess and a print of the Indian God, Krishna, representing the male river God, Urashi. Palmer is wearing an orange “George” cloth skirt, beads and long necklaces invoking snake imagery and Igwuru leg rattles for dancing. Igwuru rattles are said to attract lovers and have even been added to modern ladies’ handbags for that reason. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Egbema 1989.)



FIGURE 7 The same "Eze Mmiri," ten years earlier. She is also called "Eze Nwanyi" (Queen), as on her T-shirt, a title equally applied to the town's oldest woman in charge of settling disputes concerning women. Here, the Eze Mmiri performs one of her regular four day Mammy Water rituals in her home with her assistant/co-priest, Sunday the Dada. "Eze-Ugo" (king [with an] eagle [feather]), and with her group, "Otu Eze Nwanyi." The women are wearing white dresses (for Ogbuide) with red seams (for Urash). The priestess is beating a wooden upright drum, while her co-priest is beating a round clay-drum. In the background, to the priestess' right, a Mammy Water poster painted on plywood is leaning against the wall. The same poster framed as a picture, is hanging on the wall above the priest's left shoulder, to the right of the door. To the left of the door, there is another framed picture (not clearly visible). This poster of a three-headed Hindu God represents the "male Mammy Water," the river God, Urashi. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Orsu-Obodo 1978.)

danger, disease, death, witchcraft, forces of wilderness, water spirit dedication.

In real life, not all individuals are always as composed as in artistic imagery. People with dreadlocks, called "Dada" among the Igbo, are not normally depicted in the arts. Yet, they exist.

Drewal and Pemberton (1989) observed that children with dreadlocks are considered special beings among the Yoruba, related to water spirits, and called *Omolokun* (children of the sea). Among the Igbo, dreadlocks are more than just a fashion. "Dada" is commonly linked to a person's destiny and extraordinary state of mind. A person with dreadlocks, Dada, is thought to be either a "madman/woman" or a "prophet/ess," in touch with the forces of nature outside of human society. Dadas often live outside normal life. The source of their unusual appearance, is commonly related to water spirit possession.

Dadas claim that they can no longer cut their hair. They leave it long, forever unkempt and uncut. This can happen to both men and women at any time in their life.

Sunday was an Aro living near Oguta. He was at one time in his life considered mentally deranged by his townspeople. His illness began in 1969, when he dreamt of women plaiting his hair; it lasted for many years. He was treated and cured by the water-priestess, Eze Mmiri. When I met him in 1978, he had attained the highest male water-priesthood title, Eze Ugo, and acted as an assistant to the priestess in the worship of the lake Goddess, *Uhammiri*, and her husband, the river God, *Urashi*, and in the priestess' healing work (FIG. 7). Sunday's popularity and success as a "native doctor" reached far beyond his home town, Izombe. In 1986 he was a widely respected personality, and his dreadlocks reached down to his waist. He never cut or combed his hair. His mysterious death in 1987 was ascribed to jealousy and witchcraft (and/or poison).

When a person's hair starts growing "Dada," his life may be in danger. "Dada" is an expression of an individual's profuse existential crisis. The crisis can be physical, emotional, or both; being at the brink of death, or close to the spirit world sets a person apart from ordinary human life. "Dada" is not just personal fancy. In my documentary film on *Mammy Water* (1991), we see it happen to a small baby, who is not even aware of what hairstyling means. Both, his serious illness and his dreadlocks are locally related to his reincarnation by the river God, *Urashi* (Jell-Bahlsen 1991; Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1982).

Long hair means "wild" hair and wildness spirit involvement. It is the opposite of well-groomed, cut, or shaven hair in men, and of braided, or styled hair in women. "Wild hair" has a particular significance for women.

As a young maiden, she is adored and praised at the height of her adolescent beauty. But the transition to adulthood marks a shifting of ideals with her entry into womanhood. Her own beauty is now the beauty of a mature woman, a matron who acts, looks, and is looked at, differently from an adolescent girl. In Oguta, the transition from one stage of life into the opposite is marked through initiation, traditionally involving the young girl's ritual death, clitoridectomy, and re-birth as a woman (Nwapa 1966; Boone 1986).

The transition is not an easy one, and not every young woman may find it easy to identify with the ideals of mature beauty and with the constraints of womanhood, marriage arrangements, and other social expectations and pressures (Jell-Bahlsen 1991; Boone 1986; Thompson 1983).

In precolonial times, adolescent Oguta girls customarily enjoyed considerable premarital sexual freedom that ended abruptly at their marriage, when the prospective lover had to hand over his loin cloth to the husband. In addition, marriageable girls underwent initiation rites into womanhood that involved the fattening house, grooming, education in home-making, and clitoridectomy. Today, it is said that clitoridectomy is often performed at a girl's birth in the hospital, but a woman is not really considered marriageable unless she has had this surgery (Nwapa 1966, 1970).

Some young women revolt against society's norms and expectations, as did the heroines of Flora Nwapa's novels *Efuru*, *Idu*, and *The Lake Goddess*. The heroine of *Efuru* finally turns to worship of the lake Goddess, *Ogbuide*.

In a similar vein, a young Ibibio woman revolted against the consummation of marriage, and in the words of her mother, "each time she laid down on the bed with her husband, the water came between them" (FIG. 8). Later, "She became a priestess of Mammy Water. From her *hair* preparation, you can see that she is Mammy Water herself" (Jell-Bahlsen 1991).

The young woman's hair style, in this case long braids, attachments and combs, signal her identification with the water Goddess, Mammy Water (FIG. 9). Mary-Magdalena is one of many Mammy Water worshippers in that area, who at one time in their life revolted against their marriages, their jobs, their training, or against what society expected from them in their lives. They all traded esoteric involvement, priesthood, or water-worship for ordinary married life. Even if married, a Mammy Water worshipper normally reserves one day out of the four day Igbo market week for the water deity to whom he/she is devoted. On this day the worshipper's mind and body is reserved for Mammy Water (Jell-Bahlsen 1991).



FIGURE 8 Three Ibibio women from Oron. Madam Grace Joe (left) was in the fattening room preparing her for marriage, when she revolted and “Mammy Water came to her.” On her left, a Mammy Water priestess with her daughter. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen 1989.)

Mammy Water is often described as “the embodiment of beauty”; but her long hair is synonymous with a particular kind of beauty: the beauty of a young maiden, ephemeral like white limestone, yet equally powerful. A power associated with the refusal to lead an ordinary life, connecting her to the esoteric world of water spirits (Boone 1986).

OGBUIDE, THE GODDESS OF OGUTA LAKE

In Oguta, Mammy Water is locally known as the lake Goddess *Ogbuide*. Flora Nwapa describes the Goddess’ special importance to women. Her divine image is opposed to that of Europe, where God is defined—and limited to—an old white man, with blue eyes and a beard. While European societies have ignored and actively suppressed the female powers of the universe, these very forces are a continued focus of religious beliefs, recognized as a source of consolation, healing, strength, nourishment, and artistic expression, notably to the women in and around Oguta. They are known as the *Oru*, or riverine Igbo.

Though highly localized, *Ogbuide* represents the female side of the Igbo universe, and beyond. She is attributed with fertility, with giving



FIGURE 9 Mary-Magdalena is Madam Grace Joe's daughter. According to her mother, "from her hair you can see that she is Mammy Water herself." The chalk paintings on her head refer to her destiny and to the python. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Oron 1989.)

children, food, health, and wealth. She may either challenge, or reconcile ancestral custom, the order of men, and the balance essential to one's emotional and physical well-being. The supreme water Goddess controls the crossroads, the waters of transition, from and into life and death. In this capacity, she is represented by the color white, and the ephemeral white limestone.

A powerful Goddess, *Ogbuide* is not without a man. A divine pair, the goddess and her husband, the river God, *Urashi*, embody the power of procreation and of continued life. Their complementary relationship is symbolized in the colors red and white.

The water of Oguta lake is turquoise-blue, praised for its clarity, and locally called "white." In shallow places, the white sand at the bottom of the lake is clearly visible. The lake Goddess' "whiteness" is associated with female fertility and contrasted with the "red" color of her husband, the river God, *Urashi*, and his virility.

Ogbuide's own "coolness" (and femininity) is clearly visible at the

place where the white/blue water of the lake meets and contrasts the muddy brownish-red water of the river *Urashi*. The dividing line is sharp, the contrast an impressive natural sight whose mysterious beauty has been admired for centuries.

Ogbuide and her husband, *Urashi*, are venerated until this day and beyond. *Ogbuide* features prominently in local life, as Flora Nwapa attests in her novels, *Efuru*, and *Idu*, and in her children's book, *Mammywater*.

Just as the Yoruba river Goddess, *Oshun* is said to have saved the town, *Oshogbo*, from an Islamic invasion in the 19th century, *Ogbuide* is credited with defeating invading soldiers, during the Nigerian civil war around 1970 (Jell-Bahlsen 1991; Osuntoki 1995). We read about this in Flora Nwapa's novel, *Never Again*, and we are told so, by an elderly woman from *Oguta*, in my own film, *Mammy Water: In Search of the Water Spirits in Nigeria* (Jell-Bahlsen 1991).

Recently, a new temple was built for the Goddess, another one for her husband. These open cement structures were erected in sacred groves by the waterside, away from the town. The water deities belong to the realm of the forces of nature, outside, but at the same time guarding human society.

The temples are designed to hold large parties of worshippers on their pilgrimages, ritual cookouts, feasts, and dances.

Ogbuide's local priestesses and priests are highly respected. Some are widely known as diviners and healers. They know the beneficial, but also the deadly powers of herbs and roots. Some devotees worship the goddess in private, others are leaders of their own congregations, holding regular meetings, every four days. Their rituals are both religious and artistic expression, and in addition, a form of therapy to some.

Just as the people who worship her, *Ogbuide* has many names. She is *Ogbuide*, and she is *Uhammiri*. She is respectfully greeted, *Eze Mmiri di Egwu!* (The water monarch is awesome); She is *Eze Nwanyi*. For outsiders, she is referred to as *Mammy Water*, in pidgin English, and, as Flora Nwapa said, to reach audiences beyond local confines.

IGBO RELIGION: SUPREME DIVINE FORCE AND A PANTHEON OF DEITIES, SPIRITS AND ANCESTORS

The Igbo share certain cultural values, including the idea of a supreme God, outlined by Victor Uchendu (1965), Aniakor and Cole (1984), and Chinwe Achebe (1986).

The Igbo supreme God, *Chi-Ukwu*, is beyond shape and gender, an abstract force, too large to be contained in temples, or to be captured

in images. Only missionary-trained, or foreign-influenced artists would dare to create an image of God.

The supreme divine force, the power of life, death, creation and procreation can manifest itself through the aquatic or royal python, a prominent image in classic African art and in the well-known modern print.

Below *Chi-ukwu*, there is a pantheon of highly localized female and male deities, nature spirits and ancestors.

Customarily, people do not address the supreme God directly, but rather through these messengers, the *Arisbi*, at their shrines and temples. One of them is the supreme water Goddess, locally known as *Ogbuide*, or *Uhammiri*.

The clearest account of the generalized supreme water Goddess, *Nne Mmiri*, "mother water," Mammy Water, is found in a book by Chinwe Achebe (1986).

THE WOMAN AS GODDESS IN IGBO COSMOLOGY

In her book, *The World of the Ogbanje*, Chinwe Achebe describes the generic *NNE MMIRI*, the supreme mother water goddess in Igbo cosmology. This Goddess has different local names (Achebe 1986).

The Igbo supreme God, *Chi-Ukwu*, is also known as God of destiny. When the yet-to-be-born individual receives his/her life and personal *Chi* from God, the person makes a commitment about his destiny and course of life on earth, witnessed by *Chi-Ukwu*.

Yet, before entering and exiting this world, the individual must cross a river. Because the concept of time is circular, one must cross a river twice—not only once, as in the crossing of the river, Styx, at death, in ancient Greek mythology.

When crossing the river to enter life on earth, the individual is challenged, either by the earth Goddess of the wild bush, *Onabuluwa*, or by the supreme water Goddess, *Nne Mmiri*, Mammy Water.

At this point, the individual's destiny, his/her sacred pact with the supreme God is at stake. He/she may either defend it, or change its course, by forming a pact with the mother water Goddess. This may not only alter the individual's life and destiny, it also dedicates the person to the Goddess as her devotee. If the individual later tries to evade both, his/her destiny *and* the Goddess's claim, by refusing to conform to either one's original destiny, or the Goddess's demands to fulfill her requirements, then, this may cause illness, mental derangement, continued loss of children, husbands, and eventually premature death, as in Elechi Amadi's novel, *The Concubine*, and Flora Nwapa's novels, *Efuru* and *Idu* (see also Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1982 and Jell-Bahlsen 1991).

At death, a person's *chi* returns to the sky God, *Chi-Ukwu*. The individual is eventually reborn, although not with the same body and *chi*. Before reincarnating, the new person must again confront the Goddess, to sort out his/her destiny. After birth, it must be determined who reincarnated the new being (Jell-Bahlsen 1984).

As the divine mother, the water Goddess is imperial in challenging or confirming one's destiny. She is not only present, but also pivotal for one's entry and exit into or from this world. The divine woman is believed an eternal, intrinsic and dominant force of our very nature, our existence, our life course and destiny. She reappears in the New World in various guises and forms of worship, e.g., the Goddess Erzurli in Haiti (Deren 1947; Thompson 1983).

ECONOMY

The water Goddess's crucial position at the cross-road, or river, between life and death parallels the economic importance of the waters of *Ogbuide* lake and her tributaries in Oru life (Jell-Bahlsen 1994, 1980; Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1981).

The precolonial economy of the Oru was based on farming, fishing and trading, today supplemented by many other professions and trades. Mineral oil is pumped nearby. Yam and cassava are the most prominent staples, supplemented by plantains, rice, and a variety of beans, vegetables, palm oil, fish, small game, goats, sheep, poultry and an occasional cow.

Before the advent of roads, the rivers and lakes provided the most important base of transportation of people, materials, produce, and goods for trade. The water ways provided a major source of communication and an important resource in the trading networks controlled by women. The rivers have also provided access to foreign intruders.

Ogbuide lake, the river Niger, and its tributaries form an interrelated network of waters, of vital natural resources, upon which the Oru towns' very existence and continuation depends.

The annual flood determines the planting seasons, and also the ritual calendar of the towns (Jell-Bahlsen 1994). However, while determining the cycle of life, subsistence and cultural activities, the annual flood is not always predictable. The flood is pivotal for ensuring an abundance of fish and crops, yet, it is beyond human control.

The supreme economic importance and threat posed by these waters is echoed in the importance and awe attached to the goddess of the lake, *Ogbuide*, as well as the deities of the adjoining rivers and creeks. They are the most important, yet most unpredictable forces, potentially benevolent, but also harmful.

The gifts, nourishment and benevolence of the mysterious, awesome and divine water is perceived as essential to human life and existence. To ensure continued favors from this volatile force, people must maintain good relations through paying homage, and offering sacrifice, in properly performed rituals, supervised by priests, constantly maintaining and serving the deities' shrines (Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1981; Jell-Bahlsen 1980, 1991).

RITUAL LEADERSHIP

An uninterrupted installation of these priests and priestesses is deemed essential for the town's continued existence, health, and comfort. The Goddess's priests and priestesses are chosen on several levels, operating within the carefully balanced different ritual domains of men and women. Oru society revolves around patrilineal village kindreds. But, despite these patrilineal structures, women did play important complementary parts in precolonial ritual activities and they continue to do, in many ways.

Important expressions of women's ritual powers are: 1) the town's oldest woman, Eze Nwanyi (Jell-Bahlsen 1994). She is invoked by women to settle domestic conflicts. She can fine any husband and no one would dare to disobey her orders. She also performs highly secretive, but crucial rituals, in the annual ritual calendar of events, paralleling those of male priesthood. 2) The *Umuada*, lineage sisters, perform important birth- and death rituals (FIG. 10). Their curse is feared and they are guardians of justice and social balance. They also provide a sanctuary and space for their children, men and women contradicting lineage norms.

In addition, there are three (3) types of priesthood through: 1) inheritance (m.), 2) senior marital status (f.), 3) vocation, or possession (m. and f.) (Jell-Bahlsen (1980).

Not every individual who inherits, or marries into senior ritual status and the duty to serve a shrine is inclined to take up this post. Failure to do so may have fatal results. It also opens the way for additional candidates.

For society at large, possession is an alternate recruitment strategy for the most important and volatile water deities. The avenue of possession is open to both, men and women, irrespective of kingroup affiliation, age, or marital status.

This "spirit calling" leads to full-time devotion to the water Goddess and her male consorts, jointly and commonly known as Mammy Water. Because it is full-time, and because it is through a spirit calling, this type of priestly service is highly recognized as powerful.

However, like ritual leadership based on kinship or marriage, some



FIGURE 10 Women "Nwanwas," children of the "daughters," Umuada of the lineage of the deceased, ritually acting out and demonstrating wild behavior, during a funeral ceremony for the Okpara (male elder of the lineage). (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsten, Orsu-Obodo 1979.)

women (and men) at first may resist the call. This refusal to serve a shrine invariably causes problems in reaching one's personal destiny.

The possession route is not an easy one. It requires tremendous mental effort. To be selected by the Goddess through possession may entail special powers exceeding those of men and depend on one's personality, "destiny," reincarnation and life experience.

The personal connection with the extra-social, wilderness spirit, the forces of the water, ascribed to personal destiny, *akaraka*, in Igbo, is explained by the water priestess, Eze Mmiri, herself, in this way:

Every person has his or her own destiny (Akaraka) in the world. . . .
When I got married, my destiny husband, [the river God] *Urash* came and asked me, why I left him and married another person. . . . I saw the *Mammy Water* always, even when I was with my husband.

I married in the church. But *Urash* came and held me, so that I will help the world. My husband spent money on my treatment.

I didn't know what to do. When I was cooking soup for my husband, I put salt in the fire and wood in the pot. Every night, the spirits would take me to the bush. They showed me leaf that will kill and leaf that will cure. They asked me to do good and not bad. I lost eleven children.

But Chineke [=Chi-Ukwu=supreme God] was kind and gave me so many. *Ubammiri* [the goddess of the lake] and *Urash* [river god], you have helped me. I married [another wife] for my husband, and they gave me children. I get [money] for feeding the children (Jell-Bahlsen 1991).

Priestesses of the Goddess, *Ogbuide*, and of her husband, can be of any age. Their dedication to ritual leadership and partial celibacy often begins at the time they marry or even younger.

There are many female and some male water priests among the Oru. The majority of their followers are women, and there are also child members (FIG. 11). The worshippers meet regularly, every four to eight days of the four day Igbo market week, and on special occasions. Their worship and merriment may last all night.

Women join a group of water worshippers, to gain access to esoteric knowledge, to ritual leadership, or because of personal problems, and on behalf of her children (Jell-Bahlsen 1991).

HEALING AND INITIATION

A water priestess responds to the needs of either a villager, or a stranger, who may call her to mediate with the spirit world (FIG. 12). Most cases involve fertility, the birth and death of children, and questions of reincarnation and naming. Sometimes other hereditary male priests are consulted instead of Mammy Water priests/priestesses. In this highly sex-segregated society, women seem to prefer consulting with women, while men seem to prefer consulting with men.



FIGURE 11 "Otu Eze Nwany'i," (one [group] of the queen) the priestess' female followers during the same session in honor of the lake Goddess Ogbuide/Uhammiri (Mammy Water) and her husband the river God Urashi (Mammy Water), on Orrie day. Most of the priestess' followers are women (25 of 28), there are also a few men. The women are wearing white Ogbuide T-Shirts and white cloths with red seams. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Orsu-Obodo 1978.)



FIGURE 12 Sign board of the "Eze Mmiri" advertising her healing powers. On the left of the side board, the female Mummy Water, on the right her male counterpart. In the center, the priestess herself is shown, holding a python and a charm and attending to a patient while preparing medicines with the assistance of spirits. The patient's hands and feet are tied, because he is in a confused state of mind and in danger of running away or harming himself. (Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen 1990.)

Among the Igbo, all physical or mental disorders are regarded as social disorders, caused by individual spirits, or by an imbalance in the essential balance between personal, social and natural domains of human beings. There is no rigid line between the illness of body and mind, of physical and spiritual well-being. Healers are also priestesses and attend to both, spiritual and physical needs. An excellent documentary illustrating the work of a spirit medium-healer can be seen in the film by Asch, Asch and Connor (1978). Here, a Balinese spirit-medium acts in a way highly reminiscent of an Oguta Mammy Water priestess.

When social norms are broken, *e.g.*, as marriage arrangements, such anti-social, and often destructive behavior is locally interpreted as a form of "mental disorder" that requires "healing" by a "native doctor" (Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1982; Jell-Bahlsen 1991; Boroffka 1973; Colley and Bonmarrage 1984).

The healer-priestess reconciles the individual with his/her personal *chi*, with his/her destiny, and with custom in society, by channeling spirit possessions, and restoring personal balance. The healer-priestess may turn a former patient into an initiate and apprentice of religious worship and the art of healing. During the course of healing and initiation, the patient regains psychic, social, and cosmic balance.

It is generally difficult to be married to a woman possessed by a water spirit. Unknowingly marrying a girl already betrothed to a water

deity may even be dangerous. Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, and many other novels and tales, tell of extraordinarily beautiful and highly desirable women, who are either barren, or bear children who always die, or who bring misfortune, even death to the men who dare to marry them. These extraordinary women are not destined to marry ordinary men, because they "were already married to a water spirit."

Extraordinary women are perceived to be dangerous. But, as Robin Horton (1965, 1967, 1969) and others assert, they are also highly desirable, often very beautiful, knowledgeable, creative, inventive and highly successful in business. They are an asset to their husbands and may marry additional wives for him (as the priestess, *Eze Mmiri*). Amadiume (1987) describes how some women may also become founders and heads of their own lineages.

Flora Nwapa and others show that it is difficult for women to combine the rearing of small children with a business or professional career: "making money through trading" on the one hand, and "raising many children" on the other. This often poses a problem for ambitious Igbo women who want to have success in both areas of life. Thus, some women chose ritual dedication for personal reasons, others to gain equal status with men and secure wealth and power.

THE WATER GODDESS

Female elements, like water spirits, have a very special place in Igbo cosmology, with regard to the circular flow of time, reincarnation, challenge, and innovation. Both women and water spirits are perceived as mobile, fluid and slippery. They are at the crossroads between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between spirits and humans, life and death.

The contributions of women (and water) are known to be complementary and decisive in procreation, and for ensuring the continuity of existence and well being of the people in real life as in cosmology. This perception of gender is different from patrilineal ideology, power, and inheritance patterns reinforced in colonial times.

While Goddesses and female ritual powers were ignored and actively suppressed by secular European institutions in Africa, patrilineal structures were favored and reinforced by foreign powers and their post-colonial successors.

The male-oriented ancestor worship, male divinities, and inherited male priesthoods are far better known, documented, and acknowledged by outsiders, than the water Goddess, the earth and other Goddesses, and the ritual leadership among women. Colonial encouragement of a European style emphasis on male dominance was matched by open suppression of female leadership and ignored the need indige-

nous peoples felt for complementing and balancing ritual power and gender among the Igbo and elsewhere in West Africa (Jell-Bahlsen 1994, 1991; Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 1981).

The divine pairs, as men and women are different yet equally important economically and as ritual leaders. Both male and female are important in balancing the delicate cosmic powers. This balance of forces of nature is necessary to ensure the very existence and continuity of human spiritual and physical well-being.

CONCLUSION

Mammy Water imagery can be regarded as a modern expression of the divine woman in precolonial Igbo religious beliefs.

Igbo cosmology endows womanhood with extraordinary status and powers, ascribing to women not only complementary importance (their mature beauty), but also, awe inspiring qualities (their wild beauty).

Female power is not only complementary to male power, but pivotal, for procreation, reincarnation and continued existence within the circular flow of time. This is expressed in ritual and in the water goddess' power to challenge man's destiny. The Goddess's followers greet each other: "*Mmiri di egwu!*" (Water is awesome/power). Their leadership balances that of kinship and marital status.

Possession by Mammy Water is an alternative way of recruiting priests and priestesses for the most important and unpredictable local water deities. Women's ritual leadership re-iterates the concept of complementarity between static and dynamic elements, conservative and creative forces, continuity and challenge, ancestors and water spirits, men and women. The water Goddess, *Ogbuide*, through her priests emphasizes and reinforces female power which correspond to two superior aspects of womanhood in Igbo cosmology:

1) The idea of male and female complementarity necessary for procreation and the continuity of life is symbolized in the use of the colors red and white, the zig-zag line, the spiral, the growing tusk, the double python, the divine pair, and the Igbo concept of mature female beauty.

2) The extraordinary power of women based on the notion of the supreme water Goddess at the crossroads between death and life. This notion is associated with the circular concept of time, concentric circles, the circular python, ephemeral white limestone, the color white, the temporary, wild beauty of young maidens, and long hair.

The water Goddess, *Ogbuide*, is both, a nourishing mother, and a destructive, wild beauty beyond reach. *Ogbuide* forges these two distinct aspects of beauty into divine female power. MMIRI DI EGWU!

A Song for Ogbuide

Iyanuma, Iyanuma	<i>Iyan-uma, Iya-numa</i>
My mother, Iyanuma	<i>Nne mu, Iya-numa</i>
Iyanuma is medicine, Iya-numa	<i>Iya-numa na obu ogwu, Iya-numa</i>
Ogbuide and water mother, Iya-numa	<i>Ogbuide na iyi anwani Iya-numa</i>
It is medicine, Iyanuma	<i>Iya-numa na obu ogwu</i>
My royal husband, Aku Obi, came	<i>Eze di mu, Aku obi bia</i>
Ogbuide resembles Iyi Anwani	<i>Ogbuide yini Iyi Anwani</i>
Everybody says it is wonderful	<i>Onye obuna na odi egwu</i>
Water is wonderful and awesome	<i>Mmiri di egwu, di mu ujo</i>
Iya-numa	<i>Iya-numa . . .</i>
	<i>Aku obi na obu ije, Iya-numa</i>
Iya-numa it is medicine	<i>Iya-numa na obu ogwu</i>
Iya-numa it is medicine	<i>Iya-numa na obu ogwu</i>
Iya-numa it is medicine	<i>Iya-numa na obu ogwu</i>
Iya-numa it is wealth (money)	<i>Iya-numa na obu ego</i>
Odogwu, big woman	<i>Odogwu nwanyi</i>
Ogbuide the water monarch	<i>Ogbuide, eze iyi</i>
It has reached all of Igbo land	<i>Ogara Igbo onu</i>
You feed the poor	<i>Okpara umu mgberyi</i>
A woman of big hair	<i>Nwanyi ishi ajakaja</i>

Recorded at an Orie day meeting of the group, Otu Eze Nwanyi, at the priest-ess', Eze Mmiri's house, in Orsu-Obodo, Oct. 15, 1988.

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