



NNEKA: IS MOTHER STILL SUPREME IN IGBOLAND?
 REFLECTIONS ON THE BIOGRAPHY OF *EZE MMIRI*,
 MADAME MARTHA MBEREKPE OF
 ORSU-OBODO, 1934-2007*

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INTRODUCTION

The *Ogbuefi, Eze Mmiri*, Madame Martha Mberekpe of Orsu-Obodo was a widely recognized priestess of Oguta's water deities. This article presents an overview of a remarkable woman's life and career,¹ with special emphasis on women's empowerment in Igbo culture, and on the current erosion of female positions.²

Fifty years ago, Chinua Achebe in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*³ forecast the crumbling of Igbo civilization along the demolition of the mask manifesting ancestral ties. "It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for the great evil that was coming—its own death."⁴ At the end, the novel's hero, Okonkwo ends his own life in suicide. His death is symbolic of the ultimate annihilation of his group and culture, since a person who committed suicide could not be buried in his ancestral land according to local custom, *omenala*. Furthermore, such a person could not reincarnate in the eternal cycle of life and death and would instead forever haunt the community according to the beliefs of his people.⁵

Okonkwo's life, his actions, and his death, are intimately linked to the erosion of his society's core values and symbolic of the dismantling of the entire culture. One of Igbo civilization's core values was expressed in the

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name, *Nneka*, Mother is Supreme. The name, *Nneka*, illuminates the Igbo respect for motherhood.⁶ Furthermore, the importance of female kinship links is expressed in Igbo proverbs such as “when in trouble, run to your mother’s home,” and in addition, the notion of the cultural ideal of gender balance is again expressed in proverbs such as *Ihe kwuru, ihe akwudebe ya* (when something stands, something else stands beside it).⁷

Achebe has clearly linked the decline of his culture to ignorance of one of its core values, namely respect for the female side of the universe, when he illuminated the flaws of his hero, Okonkwo, in an interview on the occasion of celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Things Fall Apart* in New York City in 2008: “All the problems Okonkwo has from beginning to end are related to ignoring the female! And that is where he is a *flawed hero*. Women stand for compassion.”⁸

Fifty years after Achebe’s vision of the destruction of Igbo civilization and its underlying significance ascribed to social equilibrium, gender balance and ancestral bonds embodied in masquerades,⁹ and only a few months after Achebe’s New York interview in the *Village Voice*, a Nigerian newspaper, *The Nation*, reported “The Slaughter of the Gods at Ezinihite,” whereby “in separate incidents the houses that accommodated *Agbaa-Asaa* and *Oke-Mmuo* masquerades were reduced to ashes.”¹⁰ We don’t know what happened to the owners of the ruined masquerades. Yet, two months later, new reports told of repeat violence, this time against the most vulnerable members of another community – children. In November 2008, the BBC aired a TV documentary on child exorcism at Calabar, entitled *Saving Africa's Witch Children*:

The substance of the documentary is how so-called religious leaders – Pastors, priests and self-styled Bishops engage in exorcism as they spread a scary gospel about the existence of evil and witchcraft in the Akwa Ibom community. This has led to mass delusion and hysteria in parts of the state with children, mostly being accused of witchcraft. The children are exposed to all forms of dehumanization. One had a nail driven into her skull. Another was given poison to drink. Many were set on fire. Innocent-looking young children including babies under the age of seven are stigmatized and driven away by their parents and relations. Other parents take their children to churches where a Pastor declares the child a witch or wizard, who is in need of deliverance.¹¹

The witch hunting atrocities committed at Calabar were again motivated by religious extremism. Similar attacks on women, female children, and elders carried out by local fanatics are increasingly reported throughout Southeastern Nigeria. These attacks against the more traditional neighbors and family members of communities are largely carried out by super-devout community members. They are the people like Achebe’s “over-zealous convert who wept louder than the bereaved,”¹² or people

who like the “Papa” character of Adichie’s novel, *The Purple Hibiscus*¹³ strive to be more British than their former “colonial masters.”¹⁴ Extremely devout converts strive at being better Christians than their teachers and as Achebe observed 50 years ago, their “allegiance to the Church is thicker than blood.”¹⁵

Today’s zealots *invite* their flock to act against their own kin. The cunning strategy of *invitation* becomes evident from an interview with one Evangelist Onoye in *The Nation*:

I embark on all these things based on *invitation*. . . from villages, families and individuals *inviting* me for prayers and in which they will always agree with me that shrines would be destroyed and all those things according to the word of God shall be done. . . . Without such agreement, I do not answer such calls and I don’t think that there is any reasonable human being that can pounce on somebody, destroy his shrine no matter what unless on *invitation*. This is a free world, you have the right to worship whatever you want to worship, unless one gets tired of it, we are always *invited* as deliverance ministries [Emphasis added].¹⁶

As we shall see later, the pretext of invitation conveniently serves as a safe guard to ward off interference by other community members, its traditional rulers, or neighbors who might otherwise help a beleaguered family member against attacks by religious extremists. One such incident is discussed here: the invitation to witch-hunt a 77 year old widow, the late *Ogbuefi, Eze Mmiri*, Madame Martha Mberekpe of Orsu-Obodo, by her own step-children and their fellow Charismatic Christians who also claim to be Catholic, in the summer of 2006. The events were tolerated, yet also widely condemned by the villagers and their leaders.

The late *Ogbuefi, Eze Mmiri*, Madame Martha Mberekpe of Orsu-Obodo was a widely recognized priestess of Oguta’s Lake Goddess, *Ogbuide*, who is also known as *Uhammiri*, and of her husband *Urashi*.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Water is life; without water there is no life. All life on our planet originates from water. Among the Riverine Igbo of the Oguta area, water has long been recognized as “the life giving thing.”¹⁷ Against this existential knowledge, the water Goddess¹⁸ is locally embodied in the Goddess of Oguta Lake *Ogbuide* who is also known as *Uhammiri*. Oru-Igbo tradition awards the water Goddess an eminent position in its pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. Locally, *Ogbuide’s* importance equals that of the earth Goddess, *Ani/Ala*. In the Oguta area, all behavioral codes of conduct were until recently customarily ascribed to the lake Goddess. Yet, the earth Goddess is better known to the outside world and her supreme importance for Igbo custom, *omenala*, has been vividly illustrated by Chinua

Achebe and Victor Uchendu among others.¹⁹ The land, *terra* (in Latin), was also the natural focus of territorial conquest in pursuit of colonial interests.

Oguta's Lake Goddess, is a water deity primarily associated with female fecundity. She is believed to define and guard over society's reproductive norms. As elsewhere in Igboland,²⁰ local people have prayed to the divine pair of water deities for offspring for centuries. Oguta's well known novelist, Flora Nwapa, has challenged some of her society's reproductive norms and especially the preoccupation with child bearing from a feminist perspective. Some foreign authors have interpreted Nwapa's novels as questioning local beliefs in the lake Goddess' ability to grant children.²¹ Yet, despite her Christian conviction and ambivalences towards indigenous beliefs, Nwapa has firmly acknowledged *Ogbuide's* local origins and the deity's importance to female empowerment as deeply grounded in the culture and expressed in the admiration of motherhood, as well as in indigenous institutions such as female priestesses and *umuada*, the collective lineage "sisters."²²



Figure 1: Healer sign board of the Eze Mmiri of Orsu-Obodo.
Photograph by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen 1978 Mammy Water

The priesthood of the preminent female deities, earth and water, is traditionally hereditary.²³ It was vested within specific patrilineages, *umunna*, and reserved for initiated men within these groups. However, additional avenues of priesthood of the water deities are open to both men and women through vocation. This type of non-hereditary priesthood is commonly known as *Mammy Water*. Even though some *Mammy Water* priests were male, many *Mammy Water* priestesses were prominent women in the past. These prominent women held esoteric offices and in addition, some were prominent diviners and herbalists. As healers, they attended largely to fertility, gynecological, as well as mental health issues.

A VILLAGE WOMAN'S ESOTERIC LIFE AND CAREER

The *Ogbuefi*,²⁴ *Eze Mmiri*, Madame Martha Mberekpe was a powerful and famous *Mammy Water* priestess, diviner and herbalist. Her road to empowerment led through suffering, losses of many children, pain, and illness. At the peak of her career, she supported her marital family with income from her spiritual work. Yet, she died away from home and impoverished in 2007. What is worse, her demise came at the hands of her own step children.²⁵

Madame Martha was born in Umubogeri village of Orsu-Obodo, in 1934.²⁶ She married Linus Mberekpe of Igbogankwo village in Orsu-Obodo in the late 1950s, and their first daughter, Anastasia was born 1959. Her second surviving daughter, Bernadette was born five years later. Martha gave birth to thirteen children. She lost eleven children, including all of her sons. The woman was overwhelmed by so much pain of repeat deaths to the breaking point of losing her mind. She became mentally deranged and, in her own words, "put salt in the fire and wood in (her) cooking pot."²⁷ According to Madame Azu-Ama-Onyeoma, an elderly woman married into the same *umunna*, Martha's husband had to be persuaded not to abandon his wife. He spent much money on her treatment. The diviner and herbalist Ebiri Obua cared for Mrs. Mberekpe, and eventually healed and initiated her into the worship of the water deities. He bestowed the title *Eze Mmiri* upon her. Having suffered mental stress from conflicts between reproductive and life expectancies on the one hand, and losing too many children on the other, she not only coped and overcame her own problems, but later also acquired the skills and expertise to help others. Most of her clients were women, but she also helped many men. The *Eze Mmiri* was a priestess of the water goddess, *Ogbuide* and her husband *Urashi*. But she also became a famous diviner and herbalist known for successfully treating infertility, gynecological problems, mental disorders, and many other diseases. The list of the *Eze Mmiri's* grateful former patients and their relatives is a long one. She began keeping a photo album as proof of her extensive track record as an herbalist, as urban clients increasingly denied having sought the help of a "native doctor." Madame Mberekpe was a major inspiration to Flora Nwapa, who interviewed her, and whose novels *Efuru*,²⁸ *Idu*²⁹ and *The Lake Goddess*³⁰ portray women such as this priestess and her largely female clientele.

Having lost eleven children and especially all of her sons was a problem not only to the *Eze Mmiri*, but also for her husband, Mr. Linus Mberekpe.³¹ As a result, the couple decided that he should take a second wife, and the *Eze Mmiri* scouted, courted and married a co-wife for her husband in 1970.³² Their first daughter, Anastasia had been married in

1968, and her parents used her bride price to pay for the father's bride price for Omashiri, his 2nd wife.³³

I witnessed the *Eze Mmiri*, her husband, and co-wife peacefully living together, during my many visits. Omashiri got eight children for their husband. Seven children survived, that is, four girls and three boys. Their husband usually went to the farm, while the *Eze Mmiri* supported the family with her modest income from her divination and healing work. She fed, clothed and schooled the children and cared for them like her own. When their husband took a third wife in 1993, both women objected. The third wife later developed breast cancer and died in 1994.

A big woman, the *Eze Mmiri* had not only well-wishers, but was also exposed to envy. She was suspected of witchcraft, when her former patient and long-time assistant, Sunday the *Eze Ugo* died in 1983, and again when the 3rd co-wife died. But these suspicions were quickly abandoned. The *Eze Mmiri* had ample supporters and led a group of followers and fellow worshippers of the water deities. Her husband died in 1995, and soon after, one of her oldest group members died, and then her designated successor, a young woman known as *Mami*. Yet, she still had her group of followers, who met regularly for their worship, as did several well-known *Mammy Water* priestesses and herbalists in Oguta, such as the *Eze Nwanyi Ifunanya*, and many others between 1960 and 2000.

The *Mammy Water* priests and priestesses of the Oguta area cater mostly to women's psychological and health needs. Many of their clients have suffered from post-colonial stress, acculturation trauma, and stress related to the reproductive norms and other social pressures endemic in their culture, illustrated in the novels of Oguta's late novelist, Flora Nwapa. An *Eze Mmiri's* home was a place of union and worship, where a female constituency and some men congregated every fourth or eighth day of the Igbo market week, depending on the respective leader's preference.³⁴ The regular sacred rituals for the water deities were religious worship, relaxation, artistic expression, communion and therapy for the participants at once. Their religion was appeasing and soothing to the soul and with her congregation the priestess provided psychological support to members in mourning or in need.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

All religious worship compensates for worldly hardship. The bereaved, exploited, less educated and especially the poor, who have less access to a good life or even health care, are particularly in need of emotional support and arguably more susceptible to religious messages. In medieval Europe, the cleric elite historically amassed wealth and exploited the poor.

In the Middle Ages, feudalism, and a nominal Christianity whose corruptions had converted the most beneficent of religions into the most baneful of superstitions, perpetuated every abuse of the Roman tyranny, and added new oppressions and new methods of extortions to those invented by older despotism. . . . "Feudalism," says Blanqui, "was a concentration of scourges. The peasant, stripped of the inheritance of his fathers, became the property of inflexible, ignorant, indolent masters; he was obliged to travel fifty leagues with their carts whenever they required it; he labored for them three days in the week, and surrendered to them half the product of his earnings during the other three; without their consent he could not change his residence, or marry. And why, indeed, should he wish to marry, when he could scarcely save enough to maintain himself? The Abbot Alcuin had twenty thousand slaves, called *serfs*, who were forever attached to the soil."³⁵

During that time, the Catholic Church also brutally suppressed resistance, female herbalists, and scientific progress. We note the horrors of medieval witch hunting in Europe that lasted 400 years, during which time an estimated one million women or more were killed in Europe alone,³⁶ and where the majority of accusations and attacks were directed against midwives and female healers.³⁷ We also note the plight of Galileo and his compatriots, and furthermore, the current opposition by right wing evangelists to the scientific theory of evolution and to certain types of research and medical procedures in the United States, an opposition that connects to the medieval European dichotomy between the empiricism of largely female peasant healers and science on the one hand, and the "repressive fatalism of Christianity" on the other.³⁸ Thus, in his stinging analysis and critique of capitalism and its predecessor, feudal society, Karl Marx has castigated religion as "opiate of the masses." Going a step further, Edgar Ridley has equated all religion and mythical thinking with exploitation, racism and oppression.³⁹

However, the political economy of medieval Europe, its feudalism and Catholic religious institutions, differed substantially from those of pre-colonial Igbo. As noted by Blanqui, Bloch, Marsh and others, Europe's medieval peasants were serfs of their feudal lords and their social status was closer to that of slaves than free men and women.⁴⁰ By contrast, the citizens of pre-colonial Igboland were born free. They owned their land and did not traditionally owe taxes or levies to church, or king—as did their European counterparts. This situation has changed drastically with colonialism and its imposition of political and religious institutions serving the purpose of economic exploitation. The close alliance between the colonial and missionary enterprise in Africa has been analyzed by Mudimbe and Eboussi-Boulaga among others.⁴¹ Igbo women have waged a historic war of resistance, *ogu*, belittled as "a riot" by the colonialists and their disciples.⁴² The women who resisted the intruders and their impositions were met with the full force of a brutal regime. According to a handwritten and until recently classified report, the then colonial officer in

charge felt intimidated by an estimated crowd of 10000 (ten thousand) nude women, called for backup enforcement, and ordered a machine gun unit to shoot at the unarmed, naked women.⁴³ Many of the reports on the Igbo women's war have been officially destroyed or were classified for 50-100 years. While Catholics today may scorn female nudity as a form of protest, Gloria Chuku, and others confirm that female nudity was and to some extent still is an important customary female tactic of resistance in Africa.⁴⁴ Igbo women's bodies, strategies, and cultural heritage continue to be denigrated through oppressive exploitation, ideology and an ever increasing socio-economic divide that persists up till the present in the age of post-colonial globalization. As noted by Ifi Amadiume, "The claim of religious and aesthetic superiority, enacted through Christian modernization and dress code, denies traditional values and worth. It also rejects indigenous processes toward and negotiations with modernity."⁴⁵

The Goddess of Oguta Lake is the patron goddess of the Oru-Igbo towns. The female deity was historically regarded as a life giver and savior in times of duress.⁴⁶ Thus after the civil war, the citizens of Oguta expressed gratitude to their goddess, *Ogbuide*, for driving away the invading troops. These beliefs have angered the native parish priest, who did not mince words to enforce the people's beliefs in the help of *his* male God, not *their* female Goddess.⁴⁷ Colonialists and their disciples have long demonized African customs and beliefs in what Mudimbe has called the "missionary discourse of derision, refutation-demonstration, and orthodoxy-conformity."⁴⁸ The strategy of demeaning indigenous beliefs is paired with intimidation, and both have historically been used to justify slavery, colonial conquest and post-independence fascism in Africa. Across the capitalist, social and economic divide, society's values have shifted: Elders have become paupers and may be murdered, removing those who once upheld the social order;⁴⁹ customary ethics have given way to amorality; power is no longer identified with beauty,⁵⁰ but rather with money; money is might; greed overrules customary codes of conduct; crime is rampant; terrorism fuels general insecurity which in turn aids the rise of fascism.⁵¹ The politics of fear permeate Nigerian society from the national level down to the household level where a brute can terrorize his wife and children with impunity – as does the heroine's wife-beating father in *The Purple Hibiscus*.⁵² The effects of fear and of demonizing the other are devastating, such as when 9 school children were trampled to death in a *Mami Wata* scare stampede at Enugu in 1985.⁵³

Christian missionaries came to Africa hand in hand with colonial conquest, as illustrated in Achebe's classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, and evidenced in many African novels and analyses.⁵⁴ From the late 1990s, proselytizers have stepped up their pressure on African indigenous religions, customs, and non-Christian priests and priestesses in Nigeria, and

the rhetoric of proselytism, especially of non-mainstream religious sects has become increasingly acidic.⁵⁵ The attacks began with the destruction of art objects, such as when the shrine sculptures of the –female– river goddess, *Ava* and her husband were beheaded by fanatic “church people” near Nsukka in 1992,⁵⁶ or when the sculpture honoring the female ancestress of Umubogeri was ransacked by fanatics a few years earlier. African artistic expressions related to non-Christian religions, such as masks, sculptures and masquerade performances are shunned by devout Christians as vividly portrayed by Chimamanda Adichie⁵⁷ and evidenced in the continued attacks on indigenous art and artifacts.⁵⁸ Yet, ironically, classic African art is highly prized by foreigners.⁵⁹

Eager to increase their congregation and revenue, multiple churches compete for new members in Africa. They have now lured many followers away from the *Ndi Mmiri* groups of water worshippers in the Oguta area. Electronic media play a vital part in the success of the commercial efforts of various Churches and, as Obodimma Oha observed “just as in the case of Christian music in Nigeria, the boom in Christian videos is also an attempt to commodify the Word of God for commercial purposes.”⁶⁰ The *Eze Mmiri*’s congregation shrank, as did her colleagues’ groups of fellow water worshippers, many of whom felt pressured to leave Oguta and seek their fortunes elsewhere. Super devout Christians are targeting especially female priestesses, herbalists, and women in elevated positions – as in Europe’s notorious witch hunting and among contemporary Taliban fanatics. Furthermore, in an attempt to restrict women’s access to social positions of prestige and power, Oguta’s Catholic Church is now pursuing a ban on all female titles including *Ogbuefi*.⁶¹ Elsewhere, the homes of traditional title-holders harboring masquerades are destroyed⁶² and personal injuries soon follow the destruction of property “on invitation.”⁶³ The incidents of horrendous child exorcism reported from Calabar⁶⁴ and others are not isolated. They are all integral parts of a society that “is no longer falling apart but instead has fallen to pieces,” to paraphrase John Orijii.⁶⁵ The process of social destruction, amorality, and spiritual disintegration provides the context of what happened to the elderly widow and mother, Madame Martha Mberekpe of Orsu-Obodo towards the end of her life.

AN ELDERLY WOMAN’S LIFE FALLING APART

The *Ogbuefi*’s step-children and surviving daughters were among the early converts – reminiscent of Okonkwo’s loss of his son to the missionaries in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* – A widow, the *Mami Water* priestess had no surviving son and lived peacefully with her co-wife, Omashiri in their late husband’s compound, when in 2006, Omashiri and her son became seri-

ously ill. They suffered from “swollen stomachs,” a condition that might be linked to a typhoid infection. Yet, while typhoid is increasingly common in Nigeria, the exact cause of the woman and her son’s disease could not be verified by this author two years after it occurred. What is known is that Omashiri’s children took their mother and brother to a nearby hospital. The doctors either could not help, or were not paid, and the patients were taken home, where their conditions deteriorated and their illness carried on. The *Eze Mmiri*, who was a skilled herbalist, could not help either, and her step-children began accusing her of witchcraft, charging that she had caused her co-wife and step-son’s illness. Some relatives and neighbors interfered and persuaded the family to consult a diviner. They first consulted a Christian prophet-diviner, who determined the *Eze Mmiri’s* innocence. Not satisfied, the children consulted another prophet, who also found that the *Eze Mmiri* had nothing to do with her co-wife’s illness. Still not happy with the outcome, they went to consult yet another diviner, this time a traditional *dibia*. Again, the diviner found that the *Eze Mmiri* was innocent. But in addition, he charged that the sick woman, Omashiri was guilty of adultery and that this was the cause of her illness, that she had committed adultery with her late husband’s “brother,” without officially marrying him according to the custom of levirate.⁶⁶ The sick woman was asked to confess, but refused, maintaining her innocence.

This brought her children to the boiling point. They went to their church and although officially Roman Catholics, they *invited* their fellow Charismatic Christians. The Charismatic Christians came and staged a sit-in at the *Eze-Mmiri’s* house. They surrounded and sat on her hut, praying for her to die, for seven days. She did not die. The Charismatic Christians left. After they were gone, the elderly woman – who had been deprived of food, water and facilities for seven days – still was not dead. Her step-children then grabbed iron rods and began attacking her hut. They knocked the door in and entered her hut, abusing and beating their elderly step mother. They beat her with iron rods, spit at her, and chased her from her house. They drove her away, accusing her and shouting that they would poison her, should she ever dare to return to her home. The *Ogbuefi*, *Eze Mmiri* fled down the road and was taken across the lake by the old ferry women. She walked through Oguta, past the new market, past Chief Nzeribe’s palace, and up the hill, the entire long road to Egbuoma, where she found refuge with her second daughter, Bernadette. Back home, Omashiri and her son both died within a week.

Bernadette is a school teacher and another devout Christian. She took her mother in, but forced her to “repent.” The *Ogbuefi*, *Eze Mmiri* lived at Bernadette’s house for another year. She took care of her daughter’s business of selling phone cards while the daughter was at work teaching. According to her daughters, the old woman always turned in all the earnings

she had made and kept nothing for herself, although her own income was gone since she was forbidden to continue her healing and divination work at her daughter's house. Contrary to local custom, her step-children back home did not even permit her to eat from the fruits of her trees on the big plot of land she had owned in her husband's home. *Eze Ebube*, a former patient who is now an *Eze Mmiri* herself, told me of how she last saw the *Ogbuefi*, Madame Mberekpe when she came to Oguta to get a shoe repaired. Madame Mberekpe had asked her sister, the *Eze Ebube* for money. But *Eze Ebube* only had 100 Naira (less than 1 \$) in her home, not enough for transport. Thus, Madame Mberekpe had to trek the long, hot way home. This happened a day before her death. In the morning, she felt a great pain in her stomach, and before her daughter's family had found transport to take her to a hospital, she was dead.

They buried her in her late husband's compound in October 2007, right in front of her now defunct shrine and house where she had lived most of her life. This in itself is a change of custom, because women were formerly buried in the land of their father's *umunna*, expressing their ancestral group membership beyond death, and facilitating re-incarnation.⁶⁷ The *Eze Mmiri's* funeral was grand and videotaped. The entire town came to say good bye at her wake. They did not sing any of her songs for the lake Goddess, but exclusively Christian gospels instead. They also killed a black cow – instead of a white one, *Ogbuide's* preference. They turned the event into a proper Christian service with loud speakers and gospel choirs, right in front of the late priestess' own destroyed shrine for the water deities. The parish priest held a sermon in English with a translator for the natives. The *Ogbuefi Eze Mmiri's* daughter, Bernadette gave a roaring speech, self-righteously praising the Lord and her mother's late conversion to the proper belief.

SOME ISSUES

The *Ogbuefi Eze Mmiri's* story raises many issues that need to be further explored. Firstly, we must not equate the Goddess with the fate of her priestess. While the woman who has served the Goddess was chased away, the Goddess herself prevails: Her worship is now once again performed by the hereditary male priest after a 20 year vacancy; The annual sacrifice to *Uhammiri/Ogbuide* was performed again at Orsu-Obodo in January 2009, and while the female *Mami Water* priestess' shrine has been destroyed, the hereditary male priest has built a new temple with concrete and zinc at his inherited shrine. Other male *Mammy Water* priests and a few female priestesses persist. We still need water to live and sustain our lives.

Second is the issue of privacy and biography. The priestess' daughter, Anastasia told me her mother's story. But she was weary of "trouble" and told me semi-confidentially, fearing repression for herself and her family, and possibly attacks on me. She did not want me to interview the priest who had encouraged the violence, nor her mother's step-children, or visit the Charismatic Christians. Yet, while she told the story, Chijoke, the late Chief Ebiri's son video-taped our conversation, and his sister, Nneka translated for me. Anastasia is a Roman Catholic. Yet, she is deeply troubled and saddened by what happened to her mother. She does not want trouble, but wants people to know what happened. The issue of privacy is an urgent one: shall we keep experiencing embarrassing things such as wife-beating, incest, child molestation by family members or clerics, or other forms of domestic violence "in the family" and pretend nothing happened? Or, shall we tell the world, raise issues, help the victims while we can, and work towards change?⁶⁸

Another issue is potential male bias. Anastasia claimed that the atrocities committed against her mother would not have happened, had she had a surviving son. There is a perceived need and desire for male children in Igbo culture,⁶⁹ aptly illuminated by Flora Nwapa in her novels including *Efuru* and *Idu*,⁷⁰ and discussed by Marie Umeh who has coined the term "son-struck."⁷¹ However, is this bias really so strong as to make a mother of daughters more vulnerable to violence than a mother of—surviving—sons? The potential harm of "traditional" widowhood practices has been highly publicized.⁷² But since most of the documentation involves the exposure of the widows of wealthy men to the rage of their impoverished village in-laws, the allegedly traditional "harmful widowhood practices" need to be further examined in the context of the ever increasing socio-economic divide. Yet, in the current case, the issue was not widowhood, but rather what happen to a woman all of whose sons had died. Is there a real loophole in the customary safety net for women, due to a male bias, or is this a recent issue?

Another issue is related to personal safety and public/state interference: The then acting traditional ruler, *Udom Ajie*, HRM Henry Ohaka condemned the violence against an elderly female citizen of his town. But he also claimed that as a traditional ruler, he could not interfere into a family's internal affair. This is where the strategy of *invitation* mentioned earlier comes to mind. Furthermore, in the traditional ruler's view, the priestess' fault of abandoning the indigenous faith in the lake Goddess had brought misfortune upon her.

The sacred king's perception of his royal privileges and duties provides a stark contrast to the presumed powers of kingship described by Ikenna Nzimiro and his attempt to equate the Riverine Igbo kingdoms with European feudal society, where the monarch enjoyed absolute pow-

er over his subjects and their families.⁷³ In contrast to the absolute monarchies of Europe and her exploitation and impoverishment of her peasant serfs, pre-colonial Igbo political organization was essentially democratic. Even in Oguta, a king could be and was deposed by his people for overstepping his powers.⁷⁴



Figure 2: The Eze Mmiri, Madame Martha Mberekpe of Orsu-Obodo, 1978. Courtesy Madame Mberekpe

There is the issue of institutionalized female power and protection. The town's currently acting oldest woman, the *Eze Nwanyi* Madame Azuamaonyeoma is empowered by custom to protect women from domestic violence. But, when asked why she did not come to the *Eze Mmiri's* aid, she said that "the woman did not complain about any violence and did not ask for help."⁷⁵ I had earlier witnessed the respect and awe accorded to the town's previous oldest woman, Madame Oroko, when she was invoked to settle domestic disputes. She could fine repeat perpetrators who would continue to abuse their wives, and whose curse was feared. Furthermore, the *umuada*, or clan sisters have yielded considerable powers in the past,⁷⁶ but have recently come under attack from affluent "modernists" in connection with allegedly harmful "widowhood practices." Furthermore, Judith Van Allen has described the weakening of this seat of female empowerment as early as 1972 in her acclaimed article, "Sitting on

a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women.”⁷⁷ While I have witnessed the tremendous awe and respect awarded the town’s oldest women during my field work 1978-1992, my current impression is that today’s elderly women would not have been able to come to their sister’s help in view of the much younger and more vigorous fanatics.⁷⁸

Embedded in the institution of indigenous priestess and healer are art and indigenous knowledge. The *Eze Mmiri* and her group have performed extraordinarily beautiful music and dances during their rituals. Many of their songs are now lost, or driven underground, because few people know or dare to perform them. The *Eze Mmiri*’s successor, *Eze Ugo* is a young man, who no longer holds regular ritual sessions. He could only summon one group member, an old woman, when he invited me to worship the Goddess at the public waterside. Their musical performance was quite poor. Non-Christian music easily comes under attack, as did non-Islamic music during the Taliban regime in Kabul, when all worldly cassette tapes and even innocent games were banned. African art was an avatar of African religious beliefs.⁷⁹ Speaking of the decline of the art of masquerades, Achebe observed, “The decline today is merely a symptom of the collapse of a whole eschatology,”⁸⁰ or in Catherine Acholonu’s words, “We the people of Africa have lost everything. Every sign-post that should have told us who we are has been pulled from the base.”⁸¹

Indigenous knowledge and herbal medicines: The *Ogbuefi*’s *Eze Mmiri*’s knowledge of herbal medicines is largely gone together with her arts.⁸² Full training towards herbal medicines required a three year minimum of apprenticeship. Thus, when visited by a delegation of the Department of Forestry in 1994, the *Ogbuefi* declined to share all of her knowledge about the medicinal properties of the wild flora and fauna; such knowledge cannot be transmitted casually. Yet, some of the people the *Ogbuefi* has trained are no longer alive; others have left for the cities, or joined churches that condemn the herbalists’ methods, or even any form of medicine or vaccinations,⁸³ and prefer leaving a patient’s fate solely to God. Ecclesiastical fatalism has superseded indigenous empiricism – as in Europe’s medieval demonization of peasant healers.⁸⁴

Legal considerations: Many of the evangelical sects operating in Nigeria are financed from the USA, where they have their headquarters. In the wake of Ken Sawo Wiwa’s son’s settlement with the Shell Oil Corporation, it has become evident that victims or their relatives in Nigeria or elsewhere may successfully take companies with headquarters in the USA to court in New York to seek compensation for perpetrations committed in other parts of the world. Charismatic Christians or Charismatic Catholics, as they are also known, have branches, are financed, or are headquartered in the USA, it is conceivable that the *Ogbuefi*’s children—or the rela-

tions of other victims in similar cases—might file law suits in the USA to claim damages. However, their case might be jeopardized by the fact that the church members acted “on invitation,” a strategy also found in similar cases.

Abominations, ethics and behavioral codes: For the children to victimize their mother, the *Ogbuefi, Eze Mmiri*, was an abomination. This view was corroborated by many villagers, including HRM, the then regent of Orsu-Obodo, Ajie Henry Ohaka. Even young persons such as Ms. Nneka Ebiri, Mr. Chijoke, as well as the town’s oldest woman, Madame Azuamaonyeoma questioned by this author in January 2009, asserted that violence against one’s mother—even if a step-mother—amounts to an abomination in the Igbo traditional frame of reference where the name *Nneka* translates as “mother is supreme.”⁸⁵ Yet, as pointed out by Oriji, abominations no longer deter from committing heinous crimes. According to Oriji and others, “amorality” and rogue behavior are facilitated throughout Igbo land by the unraveling of cultural norms, ethics and codes of conduct.⁸⁶ Examples include the slaying rather than veneration of one’s elders by members of their extended own family, as in the brutal murder of the widely recognized Igbo scholar and elder, Victor Uchendu by his own kinsmen.⁸⁷ The witch hunting of the late *Ogbuefi, Eze Mmiri*, a 77 year old widow at Orsu-Obodo, Oguta in 2007 is another case in point.

Religious extremism and gender. It seems no coincidence, that women are frequent victims of religious zealots in Nigeria and elsewhere. We are reminded of the biblical association of Eve with the snake and with sin and of the story of Mary-Magdalena. Contemporary worldwide sex and child molestation scandals involving celibate priests have reopened the public discourse on the origins of the celibate and on the anti feminine stand of the Catholic Church. According to the German theologian, Georg Denzler, Christianity does not originally require celibacy, nor does it necessarily condemn women, the female body, or sexuality. Instead, these doctrines are interrelated and originate in medieval Europe where their invention can be traced to the political interest, lust for profane power, and perverted sexual fantasies of certain clerics. The misogynists and proponents of the celibate and of increasingly anti-feminine rhetoric include Pope Leo I (440-461), Cardinal Humbert Silva Candida (1054), Gregor VII (1073-1085), the 11th century monk, Petrus Damiani, the extremely fervent Pope Gregory IX, who in 1224 commissioned Konrad von Marburg, a “sadistic psychopath” to carry out inquisition, torture, witch hunting, and brutal persecutions of critics, scientists, and women⁸⁸ as well as Pope Innocent VIII, whose “beloved sons” Kramer and Sprenger wrote the notorious *Malleus Malleficarum* in 1448.⁸⁹

For three centuries this sadistic book lay on the bench of every judge, every witch hunter. In a long section on judicial proceedings, the instructions make it clear how the 'hysteria' was set off: the job of initiating a witch trial was to be performed by the Vicar (priest) Anyone failing to report a witch faced both excommunication and a long list of corporal punishments. . . . Kramer and Sprenger gave detailed instructions about the use of torture to force confessions and further accusations. Commonly the accused was stripped naked and shaved of all her body hair, then subjected to thumbscrews and the rack, spikes and bone-crushing 'boots,' starvation and beatings."⁹⁰

The demonizing of women healers and their branding as witches by the medieval Catholic church stems from the association of women with sex, and furthermore from the association of sex with the devil and with evil as in the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, an idea clearly expressed in the *Malleus Malleficarum*.⁹¹ This negative perception of womanhood is antithetical to associating sex with procreation, to equating children with wealth, and by extension a reverence of motherhood as expressed in the name, *Nneka*. In spirit, the historic incidents of witch hunting by the Catholic Church in medieval Europe parallels the brutal suppression and atrocities committed against women by men motivated by religious fervor during the Taliban regime in twenty-first century Afghanistan. Sadly, Africa is not immune. The increasingly negative portrayal and demonization of women in Nigeria's film industry, Nollywood, is especially evident in Christian videos and DVDs⁹² and was the topic of a recent conference in Lagos, "To correct certain negative impression created in our movies on the womenfolk, a two-day forum tagged, "Nollywood and the Dynamics of Representation" holds at the Colonades Hotel, Ikoyi,"⁹³ June 16-17, 2010.

An impediment to progress: Some misguided zealots who completely deny their own background and culture, its beliefs, traditions, ethics and history, are ignoring all that was once sacred including procreation and motherhood. These extremely devout Christians are engaging in medieval atrocities long abandoned elsewhere. Their Eurocentric, backward behavior hinders peace and development, rather than promoting their own society's progress.

A missed economic opportunity: Chasing the *Ogbuefi Eze Mmiri*, a prominent water priestess, away from her home, disbanding the group, and ending their colorful ritual performances, songs, dances and costumes has also forestalled an opportunity for tourism and economic growth in Southeastern Nigeria, a largely depressed and underdeveloped part of the country. By comparison, the sacred grove of the river Goddess *Oshun* at Oshogbo has been promoted and protected by the late Madame Susanne Wenger,⁹⁴ a long-time foreign resident artist. The site has been declared a historic site in Southwestern Nigeria and thousands of foreign tourists

visit Oshogbo each year on the occasion of the annual *Oshun* river Goddess festival. The visitors admire *Oshun's* grove and sacred rites, and bring wealth and hard currency to many locals. The rites and festivals for Oguta's Lake Goddess, *Ogbuide* and her husband, the River God, *Urash*, could have provided a similar attraction, but are ignored and attacked instead.

Sustainability and sacred nature: Western modernism ignores or belittles indigenous beliefs in the sacredness of nature and its associated existential knowledge. What the ancestors once held sacred—such as earth and water—is now wasted. As a result, we are now facing natural disasters all over the world. Even when ignoring our existential needs and exclusively worshipping a lofty God, we are ill advised to associate the Supreme Being exclusively with the male sex and to disrespect its creations including gender, procreation, and above all, nature.

Last not least, we must contemplate on the unholy connection between religion and intolerance, and to paraphrase Christiane Amanpour's contrast between "Men of God and men who kill in the name of God." On his recent visit to Jordan, Pope Benedict XVI called for tolerance and co-existence among different religions.⁹⁵ He has rejected all forms of religious fanaticism. In his speech, the Pope was primarily referring to the so-called World Religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and even the separate sections within, calling on their congregations to respect each other. However, doesn't the same call for respect apply equally to Hinduism, Buddhism, and the religions of Native Americans, Australians and Africans? Ironically Igbo wisdom calls for mutual tolerance, as expressed in many proverbs emphasizing the need for balance, social equilibrium and mutual respect? When something stands, something else stands next to it. Live and let live. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch also. If one says no to the other, let his wings break.⁹⁶

CONCLUSION

Incidents of religious extremism appear to be on a worldwide increase. Chinua Achebe has warned of over-zealous converts 50 years ago.⁹⁷ Contemporary examples are witch hunters, exorcists, Charismatic Christians and Apostolic Church members who invite their congregation into their homes for "family liberation."⁹⁸ Incidents of wife-beating, witch hunting and exorcism largely directed against females in today's Nigeria point to an increasingly misogynist attitude that contradicts pre-Christian concepts such as the reverence for motherhood expressed in the name, *Nneka*. By contrast, pre-colonial Igbo society had institutions that supported and empowered women. Achebe, Nnaemeka, VanAllen and others provide

ample examples of customary checks and balances designed to protect women from abuses or insults against their sex.⁹⁹ During my own field research in an Oru-Igbo village, 1978-1992, I have witnessed multiple incidents and institutions empowering women and protecting their interests and well-being, such as the oldest woman, *Ogene* or *Eze Nwanyi*, the *Umuada*, and water priests and priestesses, the *Eze Mmiri*.¹⁰⁰ I have also witnessed *omenala*, custom, and the powerful rules of the Earth Goddess, *Ani*, and of the Lake Goddess, *Ogbuide/Uhammiri* deterring people from abominations. I have seen *umunna* interfering in domestic violence and putting pressure on their kin to protect their wives. Many of these deterrents are gone today, as less affluent in-laws and extended families have less of an influence in a wealthy man's home and affairs, and where youngsters increasingly find themselves in an identity and ethical void. Achebe has illustrated the dismantling of Igbo culture and its values along the demise of his hero, Okonkwo, whose fall the author has intimately linked to "ignoring the female."¹⁰¹

Today's misogyny and witch hunting in Nigeria recalls Europe's medieval "dark ages." The histories of Europe and Africa are closely—and painfully—intertwined. Furthermore, "to know our history is to begin to see how to take up the struggle again."¹⁰² Church and State have historically worked closely together, suppressing the peasants of Europe's feudal society, as much as the people of Africa's colonial lands.

The witch hunting craze of Europe that resulted in the killing of millions of medieval peasant women healers accused of witchcraft was a well-orchestrated effort at subduing half of the population of the impoverished and exploited European peasantry, "well-organized campaigns, initiated, financed, and executed by Church and State.

Today's Nigeria is facing as much of a power struggle—if not more—than during the country's colonial past. The wealth and knowledge of their culture is the last resource of impoverished peasants who don't have much of a chance in a game ruled by the elite. The Church has largely lost its iron grip on Europe's bourgeoisie, but much to gain in the power struggles of Africa. Achebe has foreseen this tragedy 50 years ago. His hero, Okonkwo's ultimate demise is symptomatic for his entire culture falling apart, a decay closely entwined with the dismantling of the customary reverence of motherhood. When Christians attack and chase their elderly, widowed step mother out of her home, we must ask this burning question with *Nneka*: Is Mother still supreme in Igboland?

NOTES

1. My findings are based in extensive field research and repeat visits to the Oguta area between 1978 and 2009. I first met the *Eze Mmiri* in 1978, when I was introduced to the area by the late professor Ikenna Nzimiro. I have maintained close contact, revisited many times, first learnt about the priestess' demise in 2007, and found out the details during my visit in January 2009.

2. On women's empowerment, see for example, Sabine Jell-Bahlsten "Female Power: Water Priestesses of the Oru-Igbo," in *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), 102-137.

3. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann 1959). I am quoting from the Anchor Books edition, 1994.

4. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 186-187. See also: Sabine Jell-Bahlsten, "Falling Spirits, Crumbling Culture: Instances of Deteriorating Ethics and Codes of Conduct in Select Novels by Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Adichie and Flora Nwapa," *Mbari; The International Journal of Igbo Studies* 1, no 2, (2008): 24-43.

5. Victor Uchendu, *The Igbo Speaking People of Southeastern Nigeria* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).

6. *Nneka* is an Igbo name translated as "Mother is Supreme." The name carries an important message about the importance and awe ascribed to motherhood in Igbo culture. See also: Catherine Acholonu, *Motherism. The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri: Afa Publications, 1995); Obioma Nnaemeka, ed. (M)Othering. *Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997).

7. Obioma Nnameka, "Frontice piece" *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998).

8. Chinua Achebe in: "Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart* Turns 50 this Year: An interview with Chinua Achebe for the *Village Voice*," by Carol Cooper, *The Village Voice*, February 19th, 2008. The hero's ambitiousness and achievements would be regarded as "typically Igbo" by some; moreover, Okonkwo is an extremely contemporary and capitalist character. Yet, while Igbo culture promotes achievement it also cherishes moderation, power sharing, balance and the "muse"; Okonkwo does not meet these ideals. He is excessive, despises his father's gentleness, idleness, and artistry as a flautist and story teller. Above all, Okonkwo shows disrespect for womanhood.

9. Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*, 186-187. See also: Sabine Jell-Bahlsten, "Falling Spirits, Crumbling Culture."

10. "Slaughter of the Gods," *The Nation*, 21/9/2008 posted on: NAIJANET@googlegroups.com, Sep. 21, 2008. (DATE Accessed)

11. In November 2008, the BBC aired a TV documentary on child exorcism in Calabar: *Saving Africa's Witch Children*. UK Channel 4, November 12, 2008. Reuben Abati. *The "The 'Witch-Children' of Akwa Ibom," Guardian [Nigeria]*, Friday 28 November 2008. www.usaafriadiologue@googlegroups.com (Date accessed)

12. See Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 185-187.

13. Chimamanda Adichie, *The Purple Hibiscus* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2003).

14. This mindset first identified as "colonized mind" by Frantz Fanon is associated with a denial of one's own background, low self esteem, and a refusal to acknowledge one's own history is also an impediments to progress. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, Grove Press, 1965); Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology* (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1981); Uzodinma T. Nwala, "Things have continued to fall apart to the point that we are losing self-confidence in ourselves as people." T. Uzodinma Nwala, "Concluding Remarks" at the Arts and Film

Exhibit, *First Festival on Igbo Civilization*, Enugu, Nigeria, Feb. 13, 2009; Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, editors, *Culture Matters. How values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Chief Ikedi Ohakim, Governor, Imo State "Dare to Be Who We Are." An address at the First International Conference on Igbo Civilization, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, Tuesday, January 20, 2009; Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "Slaughter of the Gods—Who will Remember the Igbo Story? Looking at the *Owu* Masquerade as an important Repository of Indigenous Knowledge, Culture, and History"; *Africa after 50 Years: Retrospection*. Edited by Toyin Falola and Maurice Abutabi (in press); Nkuzi Nnam, *Colonial Mentality in Africa* (Lanham, Maryland, Hamilton Books, 2007).

15. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 152.

16. *The Nation*, 21/2/2009.

<http://www.thenationonline.com/dynamicpage.asp?id=77672>

17. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "Interview with Flora Nwapa," in: *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, edited by Marie Umeh (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), 633-653.

18. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology. Ogbuide of Oguta Lake* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008).

19. See Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* and Uchendu, *The Igbo*.

20. The river goddess, *Ava* and her husband at Ukanna near Nsukka are another example for a divine pair of water deities associated with procreation. See also P. Amaury Talbot, *Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their Religion and Custom* (New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1967 (c1932)). See also, Jell-Bahlsen, *The Water Goddess*.

21. Gay Wilentz, "Flora Nwapa. Efurū." *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

22. Flora Nwapa, "Priestesses and Power among the Riverine Igbo." *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses, and Power: Case Studies in African Gender*. Edited by Flora Kaplan (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, Annals Vol. 810, 1997): 425-424. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "Flora Nwapa and *Uhammiri/Ogbuide* the Lake Goddess: An Emerging Relationship," and "Interview" and in Marie Umeh, *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), 77-110 and 633-654; Marie Umeh, "The Noise of Myth and the Reality of Motherhood Fixation in Emecheta." *Nsukka: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, Vol. IV: Art, Literature and Film, 1992, 311-328. See also Judith Van Allen, "Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6, 2, (1972): 165-181.

23. Jell-Bahlsen, "Female Power" and *The Water Goddess*, chaps. 1, 2 and 10.

24. Among the Oru-Igbo of Oguta and her environs, women can and will customarily take the title, *Ogbuefi*, cow killer, reserved to men in other parts of Igboland. Azogu, Chief Augustine, A. *Oguta Cultural Heritage and Practices. A Handbook for the New Generation*. (Self published, printed at Port Harcourt, Nigeria 1998, and presented to Sabine Jell-Bahlsen at Oguta, 28/01/2009); The local Catholic Church is now set at abolishing this female title, according to Chief Azogu (personal communication, January 2009).

25. The *Eze Mmiri's* older daughter, Anastasia U. gave me a detailed account of what happened to her mother. Her story is corroborated by many others including those who had known the priestess for years, benefitted from her healing and divination skills, participated in her religious service, and bore witness to the appalling events of 2006.

26. Among the nine patrilinear *umunna* that make up the town of Orsu-Obodo, Umubogeri is the only group whose common ancestor is a woman, Bogeri.

27. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *Field notes*: Interview with the *Eze Mmiri*, April 1989 and *Mammy Water: In Search of the Water Spirits in Nigeria*. Documentary Educational Resources, www.der.org, 2009 (1989).
28. Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (London: Heinemann, 1960).
29. Flora Nwapa, *Idu* (London: Heinemann, 1966).
30. Flora Nwapa, *The Lake Goddess* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, (forthcoming).
31. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *Field notes*, "Interview with Francis Ebiri," June 1979, and *Divine Earth-Divine Water. Part 1, Sacrifice to the Lake Goddess, Uhammiri* (video) Ogbuide Films, 1979. Marie Umeh has coined the term "son-struck." Marie Umeh, "The Noise of Myth."
32. Jell-Bahlsen, *Field notes*: "Interview with the *Eze Mmiri*, April 1994."
33. Jell-Bahlsen, *Field notes*: "Interview with Anastasia U., January 2009."
34. The four day Igbo market week, *Nkwo*, *Eke*, *Orie*, and *Afor* is doubled making for two sets of big, *ukwu*, and small, *nta*, in an eight day rhythm.
35. Jérôme Adolphe Blanqui, *Précis élémentaire d'économie politique, suivi du résumé de l'histoire du commerce et de l'industrie*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1857: 156, quoted by: George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature, Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. Edited by David Lowenthal (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000 (1864), 11.
36. Barbara Ehrenreich & Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives & Nurses. A History of Women Healers*. 2nd edition (New York: The Feminist Press, 2010), pp. 14-49; Henricus Insitoris, O.P. and Jacobus Spencer, O.P., *The Malleus Maleficarum*, (The Hammer of Witches, 1448), vol. II, translated and edited by Christopher S. MacKay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 206); John Demos, *The Enemy Within: 2000 Years of Witch-Hunting in the Western World* (New York: Viking 2008), 38.
37. *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 164. Cited by Ehrenreich & English, pp. 18 and 45. Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, Third Edition (Harlow, England: Pearson, Longman, 1995), 146 and 127. Cited by Ehrenreich and English, 19.
38. *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*, 48-49.
39. Edgar Ridley, *The Golden Apple* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008). See also Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great. How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Hachette Book Group, 2007); Fabian Eboussy-Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).
40. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (London: Routledge, 1961); George Dalton, ed. *Tribal and Peasant Economies* (Austin, TX: Texas Press Source Books in Anthropology, 1967).
41. Eboussi-Boulanga, *Christianity Without Fetishes*.
42. Judith Van Allen, "Aba Riots or Women's War: Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women," in *Women in Africa*, edited by Nancy Hefkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 59-85.
43. C. T. Lawrence, *Memorandum* with an appendix and quotation by Captain Hanitsch (London: Colonial Office, 1937).
44. Gloria N. Chuku, "The 'Untouchable Vultures'? Igbo Women in Resistance Movements, 1860s-1990s," paper presented at the First *Igbo Studies Association Meeting* at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 2003; Susan Rogers, "Anti-Colonial Protests in Africa: A Female Strategy Reconsidered," *Heresies* 1 (9), (1980): 22-25; Ifi Amadiume, "African Women's Body Images in Postcolonial Discourse and Resistance to Neo-Crusaders," *Black Womanhood. Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, edited by Barbara Thompson (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 49-69. The Igbo Women's

War of 1929 is dramatized by T. Obinkaram Echewa, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (Philadelphia: Amadi Press, 2002);

45. Amadiume, "African Women's Body," 58.

46. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *Mummy Water in Search of the Water Spirits in Nigeria* and "Interview with Flora Nwapa."

47. Jell-Bahlsen, "Interview with Flora Nwapa."

48. Mudimbe, *The Invention*, 51, 52.

49. John Oriji, "The End of Sacred Authority and the Genesis of Amorality in the Igbo Mini States," *Dialectical Anthropology* 31, (3-4), (2007): 263-288; Biko Agozino, "The Intrusive Traits of Victor Chikezie Uchendu," *Dialectical Anthropology*, 31 (3-4), (2007): 289-292.

50. Speaking of the beautiful eagle feather as a sign of power, Achebe pointed to the Igbo customary identification of power with beauty. Achebe, "Opening address" at *Igbo Arts. Community and Cosmos*, exhibit at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles, 1984.

51. For example in pre-fascist Germany, Italy and Spain, where terrorism fuelled calls for a strong leadership and aided Hitler's, Mussolini's and Franco's raise to power.

52. Adichie's protagonist is immune to and above custom and its checks and balances that once discouraged domestic violence as in Judith Van Allen, "Sitting on a Man, Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 30 and Jell-Bahlsen, *The Lake Goddess*, chap. 10.

53. Chudi Uwandu, "9 Pupils Die in Mami Wata Mermaid Scare Stampede," *The Guardian*, 3 (863), Lagos, Friday, November 1, 1985.

54. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. V. I. Mudimbe has identified three moments, rather than types, of violence in missionary language, expressed in derision, refutation-demonstration, and orthodoxy-conformity. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 51, 52.

55. C. McCall, "The Witches of Nollywood," a paper presented at the 14th Triennial Symposium of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association at Gainesville, FL, 2007; Obodimma Oha, "The Rhetoric of Nigerian Christian Videos: The War Paradigm and the Great Mistake," *Nigerian Video Films*, edited by Jonathan Haynes, (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2007), 93-94; Hyginus Ozo Ekwuazi, "The Igbo Video Film: A Glimpse into the Cult of the Individual." Jonathan Haynes, editor, op. cit.: 71-82.

56. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *Ava: A River Goddess 1978-1992* (video), 1992.

57. Adichie, *The Purple Hibiscus*.

58. Jell-Bahlsen, "Slaughter of the Gods."

59. Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. See also, John Adair and Susan Fanshel, *A Weave of Time* (video). Wheelwright, Museum of the American Indian, 1987.

60. Oha, "The Rhetoric," 94.

61. Jell-Bahlsen, *Field notes: Interview with Chief Azogu*, January 2009.

62. "Slaughter of the Gods," *The Nation*, 21/9/2008:

63. *The Nation*, 21/2/2009.

64. Reuben Abati, "The 'Witch-Children' of Akwa Ibom—Saving Africa's Witch Children," (BBC TV), *The Guardian[Nigeria]*, Friday 28 November 2008;

65. Oriji, Op. cit.

66. The custom of levirate provides a widow with the option to marry one of her late husband's kinsmen, his "brother."

67. Uchendu, *The Igbo* and Jell-Bahlsen, *Field notes*, 1978-1979.

68. For a discussion of the ethics of anthropological fieldwork see: Heidi Armbruster, "Introduction: The Ethics of Taking Sides." Heidi Armbruster and Anna

Laerke, eds., *Taking Sides. Ethics, Politics and Fieldwork in Anthropology* (New York: Berghan Books, 2008), 1-22.

69. Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (London: Heinemann, 1961); Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *Fieldnotes*, "Interview with Francis Ebiri," June 1979, and *Divine Earth-Divine Water. Part 1, Sacrifice to the Lake Goddess, Uhammiri* (video) Ogbuide Films, 1979.

70. Flora Nwapa, *Idu* (London: Heinemann, 1966); Nwapa, *Efuru*.

71. Umeh, "The Noise of Myth."

72. The important discourse on widowhood practices and other female abuses of power was first generated at the first *International Conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD): Bridges Across Activism and the Academy*, convened by Obioma Nnaemeka at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, in 1992. This discussion continued in various panels and papers devoted to widowhood practices at the 2nd WAAD conference convened by Obioma Nnaemeka at the University of Indiana in Indianapolis, in 1998 and, as Obioma Nnaemeka has pointed out, "women-on-women violence" and "the issue of women as agents of patriarchal violence against women need urgent attention." Obioma Nnaemeka, "Introduction." *Sisterhood Feminisms, and Power*, 20. Obioma Nnaemeka, *Proceedings of WAAD I, (9): Culture and Society*, 1992 and *Proceedings of WAAD II*, 1998.

73. Ikenna Nzimiro, *Studies in Ibo Political Systems: Chieftaincy and Politics in Four Niger States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

74. Jell-Bahlsen, *The Water Goddess*, 13-34; Nzimiro, *Studies in Ibo Political Systems*; Hanny Hahn-Waanders, *Eze Institution in Igboland* (Nimo: Asele Institute Documentation Centre, 1990); Richard Henderson, *The King in Every Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); G. I. Jones, "Report on the position, status and influence of chiefs and natural rulers in the Eastern Region of Nigeria" (The Jones Report). Enugu: Government Printers, 1956; Adiele Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (London: Longman Group, 1972); C. C. Ifemesia, *Traditional Humane Living among the Igbo: A Historical Perspective* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1979); H. N. Harcourt, "Inquiry into the Oguta Chieftaincy Disputes" (London and Enugu: Colonial Office 1961). See also: Frederick, J.D. Baron Lugard (Lord Lugard), *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1922); Adiele Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (London: Longman, 1972), and *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

75. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *Field notes*, "Interview with Madame Azu-ama-onye-oma," January 2009.

76. Nwapa, "Priestesses and Power"; Jell-Bahlsen, "Female Power" and *The Water Goddess* chapter 10, and "A Murder Case."

77. VanAllen, "Sitting on A Man."

78. The association of youth with "progress" is a familiar theme in Western thought. Thus, the colonial administrators looking for indigenous support for Lugard's "Indirect Rule" opted for favoring Oguta's younger *obi* as an indirect ruler of the Oru-Igbo over his senior counterpart, the much older, widely respected late *obi* of Orsu-Obodo, *Nna Igwe Ozueme Oye*, He was installed as "secondary" chief in defiance of local custom in by the colonial administration in 1948; Lugard, *The Dual Mandate*; Jell-Bahlsen, "Interview with the *obi* of Orsu-Obodo, *Nna Igwe Ozueme Oye*," *Field notes* (1978): 395-398.

79. Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology* (London: Hamlin, 1965).

80. Chinua Achebe, "Foreword: The Igbo World and its Art". *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, edited by Aniakor, Chike and Herbert Cole, Exhibition Catalogue (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Art, 1984), xii.

81. Catherine Acholonu, *They Lived Before Adam. Prehistoric Origins of the Igbo. The Never Been Ruled. An Igbo Renaissance Handbook* (Abuja: CARC Publications, 2008), xxxv.

82. Ironically, an educative exhibition on malaria at the National Museum at Owerri in 2009 featured a display of herbal medicines used by traditional herbalists or "native doctors," such as the late *Ogbuefi Eze Mmiri* of Orsu-Obodo.

83. After polio had been eradicated in most of the world, a polio epidemic broke out in Northern Nigeria, where rumours about drug testing in vaccines spread in Kano State, moved devout Muslims to refuse to have their children vaccinated in 2007.

84. *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*, 48-49.

85. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *Field notes*, Orsu-Obodo, January and May, 2009.

86. Oriji, op. cit. The general insecurity in SE Nigeria and cultural decline were the theme of a "Special Plenary Roundtable – Emergent Issues of Peace and Security in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects for Democratization and Development" at the 8th Annual Conference of the Igbo Studies Association, themed "Nigeria at 50: The Igbo Experience" at Washington, DC, 2010.

87. Agozino, op. cit.

88. Various theories, such as those about Mary Magdalene explore the shift away from Christianity's balanced origins towards extremely male centered misogynist views and celibacy. Georg Denzler, *Die Geschichte des Zölibats*. (The History of Celibacy) Frankfurt, Herder, 1993. Joachim Käppner, "Heilige Versteinerung." (Sacred freeze). *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Nr. 105 Mai, 8-9, 2010: V2/6, The story of Mary Magdalene was popularized by Dan Brown in *The DaVinci Code*. London: Corgi Books, 2004.

89. *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*, 36.

90. *Ibid.*, 38-39.

91. *Ibid.*, 39-41.

92. MacCall, "The Witches of Nollywood."

93. Beti Ellerson, <http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com>.

94. Susan Wenger, *The Sacred Groves of Oshogbo* (Wien: Kontrapunkt Verlag, 1990).

95. Pope Benedict's speech in Jordan, May 11, 2009, *The International Herald Tribune*, May 12, 2009.

96. Obioma Nnaemeka, *Sisterhood*, 11; Emmanuel Ede, "Aufbauleistung: Viel geschafft." *Deutschland mit anderen Augen* (Germany seen with other eyes), ed. Ulrike Bartels, et. al. (Bad Honnef: Horlemann, 2009), 65; Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 19.

97. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 186-187.

98. As did one girl plotting to destroy her mother's house shrine, while the woman was in the hospital having suffered a stroke.

99. Judith Van Allen, "Sitting on A Man."

100. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "Female Power."

101. Achebe, "Interview" by Carol Cooper, *The Village Voice*.

102. *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*, 30.