

Chapter Three

ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MMUO MMIRI (WATER SPIRITS) IN IGBO PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

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Executive Summary

The Western approach to the management of the eco-system, which is materialistic and based on consumerism, has had very serious consequences on the environment leading to the present ecological crisis. The encounter of the African continent with the Western world, during the colonial era most especially, had its own consequences on the thinking of the African people and on their approaches towards the environment, such that the African society now lacks the adequate traditional or indigenous spiritual principles needed for the preservation of the eco-system. Before the advent of modernity, Africans related with cosmic forces associated with particular cosmic elements like water, mountains, forests, sky, etc., which established an attitude of respect for these dimensions of the natural world. Gradually, this attitude has been replaced with that of alienation and disengagement. The consequences are the misuse and exploitation of the physical environment including the water, air, land, forests, etc. The emergence of eco-spirituality is a reaction to the Western materialistic and technological approach to the environment, which lacks the depth for the formulation of a profound relationship with nature, the absence of which has led to the emergence of devastating consequences on the natural

world. There is now a growing interest at international level in the way that indigenous people interacted with and managed their environment before the advent of modernism; there is also a growing interest on how best to protect and preserve this knowledge. This piece is a response to the need for indigenous approaches towards the management and sustainability of the environment, which are connected to the broader framework of the people's cosmology and worldview. While there are a few papers written on *Mmuo Mmiri*, there is hardly literature that discusses its relationship with the eco-system or its ecological relevance in Igbo traditional societies. This work, therefore, focused on water spirits or mermaids within the context of the Igbo-African cosmology with the purpose of seeing how the relationship with this spirit force enhanced the preservation of the environment. The phenomenological and analytical methods of research were patronized. It submitted that through indigenous approaches, the African people were able to preserve and maintain their environment.

Keywords: Eco-system, Water Spirit, Eco-System, Ecology, *Mmuo Mmiri*, Environment

Introduction

The advent of Modernity, science and technology, and more so, Christianity among religions like Islam had very serious consequences on the pattern of the traditional life of the African people. Achebe (1958) captures and articulates this in his award-winning novel titled: *Things Fall Apart* in which he describes the precolonial life in southeastern Nigeria before the advent of the West in the 19th century and the consequence of this encounter. The consequence among others is that the African society now lacks the adequate traditional or indigenous spiritual principles needed for the preservation of the environment. Before the advent of modernity, Africans related with cosmic forces

associated with particular cosmic elements like water, mountains, forests, sky, etc. (Tilley 1994, Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995). The relationship that the African people had with nature established an attitude of respect for these dimensions nature. Gradually, this attitude has been declined. The consequences are the misuse and exploitation of the environment.

The emergence of eco-spirituality is a reaction to the Western materialistic and technological approach to the environment, which lacks the depth for the formulation of profound and unexploitative relationship with nature, the absence of which has led to the emergence of devastating consequences on the natural world. There is now a growing interest at the international level on the way that indigenous people interacted with and managed their environment before the advent of modernism; there is also a growing interest on how best to protect and preserve this knowledge (UNCED 1992, Gray 1997, Posey and Dutfield 1996). This new interest is anchored on the fact that the present ecological crisis has revealed the limitations of the Western approach.

This piece is a response to the need for indigenous approaches to the management and sustainability of the environment, which are connected to the broader framework of the people's cosmology and worldview. It, therefore, focuses on water spirits within the context of the Igbo-African cosmology. This piece intends to respond to questions, such as: how can a more profound relationship with nature be rebuilt? How were traditional Africans able to maintain a respectful relationship with nature? What contribution did the relationship of African traditional societies with water spirits make to the preservation of the eco-system? In our time of modernity, is it possible to tap from these spiritual forces for the conservation of the

environment? These questions and more are the primary concerns of this piece.

Theoretical Framework

The adaptation theory will be employed for this work so as to determine its framework. Adaptation is from the word ‘adapt’, and to adapt means to “make fit”. It is a very popular concept in the area of evolutionary biology and is used to imply the process by which species of animals or plants or any other living organisms become fitted into their environment- this fittedness could be in their structure, physiology, genetics, locomotion, reproduction, development, etc., (Mayr 1965, 1988). Adaption as a process explains the reason for the diversity of species (Mayr 1963, 1982). This process implies that the organism must be viable in all stages of its development and at all stages of its evolution. This adaptation ensures that the organism survives its ecological niches.

In relation to the counter between Christianity and traditional religion, it implies a selection of certain rites and customs, purifying them and inserting them as rituals in Christianity where they have apparent similarities. In recent times, its attraction has declined as it only expresses a superficial phenomenon. Paul VI (1969) emphatically urges for a more radical adaptation when he says, “Adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities, is not only possible, it is even favoured by the Church. It is in this sense, you may, and you must, have an African Christianity” (pp. 797-798). This notwithstanding, adaptation has in recent times been criticized as a pseudo-imposition and of not taking the local culture seriously. Shorter (1988) criticizes adaptation as conveying “an activity that is peripheral, non-essential, and even superficial. It was realized that the concept of

“adaptation” contained within itself the seeds of peripheral Western superiority and domination” (p. 150).

In the area of eco-spirituality, it understands African eco-spirituality as a process of the adaptation of eco-spirituality in such a manner that it fits the African environment or worldview. It is in this regard that the incorporation of African traditional religious thoughts and images such as *Mmuo Mmiri* is introduced into the discussion on eco-spirituality. The purpose of this is to communicate eco-spirituality in the language that the Igbo-African understands, using categories that are common to him or her, or a part of his or her worldview. For a better understanding of the process of adapting eco-spirituality through the employment of *Mmuo Mmiri* as an Igbo-African religious category, there is the need to understand what *Mmuo Mmiri* stands for in Igbo traditional religion.

Water Spirits in African Religion

The African universe is made up of a myriad of spirits. These spirits have their abode on mountains, hills, rivers, seas, oceans, trees, roads, markets, caves, brooks, lakes and forests. Their abode also determines the place where they are worshipped, and also the residence of the priest of the deity. There are sociological factors that affect the positioning of these divinities, based on the principle that the African is a social being who operates in the society. There are various names for these water spirits depending on the particular traditional religion. Some of these water spirits include:

- a. **Erzulie-Freda-Dahomey:** In Voodoo religion, it belongs to the group of sea gods. She is coquettish, sensual and extremely extravagant. In every shrine where a room is dedicated to her you find her white and rose-coloured

garments, a dressing table with wash basin, soap, towel, comb, lipstick and nail file kept for her use (Jahn 1958).

- b. **Egwe:** means *the rolling one*. In Voodoo religion, it is also the ruler of the sea. It is not surprising that fish and boats are its symbols. It protects sea farers and enjoys the thunder of cannons and the salute of ships (Kanu 2015).
- c. **Damballah:** In Voodoo religion, he is the god of fertility and usually lives in springs and swamps. He is symbolized by a snake and whoever he mounts during voodoo ceremonies hisses like a snake and creeps around on the ground in a snake-like curve, climbs up the rafters and hangs with the head downward like a snake (Jahn 1958).
- d. **Osun:** In Yoruba religion, Osun is the wife of *Sango* and the goddess of the river of Osun. She is a benevolent divinity, evident in her name, 'the goddess of children'. She specializes in restoring the fruitfulness of barren men and women. Since streams and rivers are her abode, gifts to her are thrown into the river or stream. Although she specializes in child giving, she could also be approached to solve other problems.
- e. **Oya:** In Yoruba religion, Oya is a female divinity, referred to as the goddess of the River Niger. If Sango was an Alafin of Oyo, *Oya* is believed to be his first wife, who wept after his death, weeping so severely that her tears formed the River Niger. She could neutralize the anger of *Sango*. Whenever he spits fire during his fits of anger, *Oya* neutralizes his anger with rain. Like Osun, she is also worshipped in rivers and streams.

Moving from the Yoruba and Voodoo religions to the Igbo traditional religion, one finds the same spirit force but with a different nomenclature known as *Mmuo Mmiri*.

Mmuo Mmiri in Igbo Religion

In Igbo-African ontology, spirits inhabit mountains, trees, the ground, the sky, the water- rivers, seas, oceans, canals, etc. The spirit that inhabits the water are popularly called *Mmuo Mmiri* in Igbo or *Mammy Water*, *Mami Wata*, *Mami Wota* in pidgin English. It occupies a prominent place in the pantheon of Igbo-Africa gods and goddesses.

Mmuo Mmiri is a female deity with variant names, and the sustainer of sea life, the bringer of hope, provider of help and protection, the bringer of gifts and exotic things. Indeed, she is said to hold the key to the gate that leads to the world of solutions. Whenever the Igbo pray, he or she does not forget to add *ka uzo anyi buru uzo mmiri*, which means, “may our journey follow the path of the stream”. It is she who guides people to exotic lands, and chooses to permit human beings to travel and reach their destinations on top of the sea (Kanu 2013, 2015).

In Igbo cosmology, Jell-Bahlsen (2014) avers that *Mmuo Mmiri* is an ancient and important deity, which underscores awe for female fecundity, sacredness of life and water. This deity is supremely beautiful, colorful, sparkling, elusive and benevolent, however, equally dangerous as she can cause turmoil among a people, diseases and even bring about death. Unlike *Ala* deity, she usually has multiple spouses and can grant children to human beings. Those who are her devotees find in her a source of fertility, children, food, health, wealth, etc. The *Mmuo Mmiri* represents the female dimension of the Igbo universe and a role

model of female achievement. Her icon among the Igbo is the python, crocodile and tortoise.

Ecological Significance of *Mmuo Mmiri*

In view of the current environmental degradation, this proposes that the traditional approach towards the conservation of the environment, as in the case of the spirituality around *Mmuo Mmiri*, can be integrated with the modern approach towards the conservation of the environment for the emergence of a new conservation paradigm. The degradation of the water environment can be traced to the disrespect and disdain for the sacredness of this element, usurped by modernity and non-indigenous religions. The result of this attitude towards this spiritual force is a gradual breakdown in the relationship between the human person and nature.

What *Mmuo Mmiri* did in relation to the protection of the environment in traditional Igbo societies is that it provided protection for water bodies associated with it. This protection was provided through the taboos that were associated with this spirit being. What gave force to these taboos was the power of the force associated with it. Thus, people kept these taboos because they feared the consequences that will come from this spirit being if the taboo is not respected. These taboos include not fishing in that water body on some particular days or not fishing at all in a particular water body as the fishes are considered the children of the water spirit. The crabs, crocodile, tortoise, snakes, water birds and frogs were seen as messengers of the water spirit and so are not to be harmed. Such water bodies become the breeding ground for species of organisms for other connecting water bodies, with a great deal of biodiversity obtainable therein. *Mmuo Mmiri* associated with particular water bodies gives a fundamental identity to the water body in question. These water bodies are, therefore, named according to the identity of the

particular water spirit that inhabits it. This does not only give an identity to the water body but gives it a voice. The water body that has no ear to hear or mouth to speak, through this spiritual power now has a voice, can be heard, listened to and represented in discussions about the preservation of the water body. Through this representation, it is not the human community that decides the future and manner of interaction with the water body; the water body can now make a contribution in this direction. When human beings begin to fail in keeping to what has been agreed, the water spirit can send a message to the community regarding the impending danger consequent upon their actions.

Very interesting is the image with which these water spirits are depicted. In Igbo cosmology, these water spirits are symbolized with the image of a woman. It is, therefore, not surprising that many members of the community take advantage of this feminine character and go to her for several needs, mostly, for the fruit of the womb; more so, because she is a woman, most women feel that she will understand their plight of bareness better than any other deity. This human, feminine and benevolent character of the water spirit creates a ground for a relationship with the human world. As such, the water body is not looked upon as merely a cosmic element but as a part of the human community that must be respected.

Conclusion

As water resources continue to diminish in different parts of the world as a result of the global climate change, exploitation of nature and growth in population, and the growing need for an alternative approach to relating with nature, this work has discussed the place of *Mmuo Mmiri* within the context of indigenous ecological knowledge systems with a view to bringing out the manner in which traditional African societies

managed their environment before the advent of the West. The Igbo-African understanding of *Mmuo Mmiri* brings in a new meaning to the understanding of water bodies, not just as a vital resource for use but as an element endowed with agency and power which connects with the Igbo people. Thus, the water body is a manifestation of the great spirit that is resident in the water. This work strongly believes that an integration of this indigenous approach with the modern approaches will yield more fruit in the effort towards addressing ecological crisis in the world.

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