

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJA)

Ethiopia

Vol. 7 (3), S/No 26, JULY, 2018:92-99

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v7i3.11>

An Ecofeminist Study of Flora Nwapa's '*Efuru*'

Sanjo, Ojedaja

College of Health Sciences

Bowen University, Iwo

Osun State Nigeria

E-mail: sanjoojedaja@yahoo.com

Phone: +2348038322497

.....

Abstract

This paper identified the great contribution of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* to ideas of ecological consciousness, and environmental protection, using theory that interlaces ecocriticism cum feminist criticism. The methodology therefore involves the conversation or ideas on the images of women and nature in 'Efuru', the association between the oppression of women and exploitation of nature by male chauvinist, thereby enslaving the female and nature in the commercial market value. From an ecofeminist perspective, this paper discovered that Flora Nwapa inculcates her novel with a theme of feminine and natural liberation from domination and violence. Flora Nwapa foresees the establishment of symbiosis, in which there is no male oppression or environment exploitation.

Key Words: ecological conscience, male oppression, ecofeminism, domination, interconnectedness

Introduction

Nature in the broadest sense is the natural, physical or material world or universe. Nature can refer to the phenomena of the physical world, and also to life in general. The study of nature is huge, if not the only, part of science. Although humans are part of nature, human activity is often understood as a separate category from other natural phenomena. As good as God, the creator of the universe has endowed humans with natural phenomenon; humans have therefore used his intellect to destroy nature for his own personal derangement. In the process, our heritage is being raped and frayed but it is advisable to solve this human destruction before it goes out of hands. The creation itself considers good as the Supreme Being who is the architects of all formations. The creation itself initially was chaotic and formless.

Flora Nwapa and *Efuru*

In the sense of human chaotic nature and the movement of their inhumanities, Flora Nwapa perceives writing as a channel to correct the perverted injustice in and around her. Her perception over misogyny

and exploitation of the environment as parallel forms of male domination, certainly takes an ecofeminist view. Before her death in October 16, 1993, Nwapa said in an interview that she used *Efuruto* explore how women are treated in the society. Having studied abroad and served in government and educational sector in Nigeria at different times and towns, there is no doubt that Nwapa had mingled enough with the society to perceive the way women are treated.

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* published in 1966

As regards colonial, environmental, and historical context, *Efuru* is set in the Igbo village of Oguta in the 1940s, almost midway between the Igbo women's war of 1929 – during which thousands of Igbo women agitated a proposed tax on married women (Egbo, 2000, p. 75) and the discovery of oil in Nigeria in 1956. It is worth to note that Nwapa published *Efuru* in 1966, a year before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil war, which lasted from 1967 to 1970 and during which Southeastern Nigeria also called Biafra – attempted to secede and take over oil revenue with it (McNeil, 2000, p. 304). During this conflict, Oguta Lake, which is located in Nwapa's hometown of Oguta, served as a Biafran army marine base. The social and political events that led to the crisis particularly the environmental and cultural devastation of the Niger Delta as a result of the oil industry would have been daily realities in Nwapa's life at the time she was writing *Efuru*; yet the novel makes no explicit references, to these events.

Further to this, implicit references are presented in Omirima's criticism of the coves that 'it is now the world of white people' (p. 194) who 'pollutes' both the environment and traditional Igbo belief systems. *Efuru* is majorly concerned with personal as opposed to political history, an Igbo woman's history, and there is need to argue an underlying ethos of environmental preservation which is inherent in the novel's dual focus on the social acceptance of a childless Igbo woman and that woman's specific connection, via her worship of Uhamiri, to Oguta Lake, an ecosystem generally associates with 'the spirit of women's collective solidarity (Amadiume, 2002, p. 52) in Igbo culture. In terms of Nwapa and *Efuru*'s reinterpretations of what it takes to worship the goddess, the novel calls for a reconception of Igbo women's roles – one shaped by an awareness of indigenous religious and environmental practices, yet one is certainly aware of the impending realities of capitalism, western education and Christianity.

Women/Culture and Nature

After the death of *Efuru*'s daughter, Ogonim – the only child *Efuru* has over the course of the narrative – *Efuru* is called to be an adherent of Uhamiri, the goddess of Oguta Lake, and Nwapa presents this honor as a mixed blessing: while Uhamiri gives women wealth and beauty, in Nwapa's novel, she is perceived – at least by *Efuru* and the village gossip Omirima – as being childless and, therefore, not able to give children to the women who worship her. While colonization had occurred by the time the story takes place, its effects are largely peripheral to the "reality" depicted by Nwapa, and while characters comment on the presence of whites in Nigeria, their statements tend to reflect a sort of curiosity about rather than a need to imitate or be fearful of western character.

The one notable exception is Omirima's assertion that "the world is changing. It is now the world of white people" (p. 194), a claim she makes immediately before an extended diatribe about how Western education and religion have neglected the dictates of Uhamiri, the goddess of Oguta Lake, particularly as those dictates affect the natural environment. Omirima criticizes *Efuru*'s mother-in-law, Amede, for allowing Ogea to fish on a day sacred to the goddess: "You allow Ogea to fish on Orie day. The day our Uhamiri says we should keep holy.... And your daughter-in-law is an ardent worshipper of the lake? . . . That's why there are no fish in the lake. That's why our Uhamiri is angry with us. The children of these days have polluted the lake. I saw three . . . school girls, on Orie day, going to fish. I scolded them But did they listen to me? Of course, they did not.... That's what they learn in school – to disobey their elders" (p. 195). Apart from blaming western education for the girls' disobedience and

subsequent pollution of the lake –and corruption of the dictates of the goddess that protects it – Omirima also indicts Christianity for undermining Uhamiri’s dictates about cultivating the land, rules that require strict observation of the flooding and receding waters of Oguta Lake: “the last flood at all. And the one before it came too early and damaged the yams, the cassava and other crops. We have these Church-goers to blame” (p. 195). These criticisms point to the importance of both Uhamiri and Oguta Lake in the daily life of the Igbo and to the ways that the West is encroaching upon both Igbo belief and environment.

In their study *Ways of Rivers: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta*, Anderson and Philip (2002) examine the connection between environment, environment degradation, and the cultural artifacts of the peoples of the Niger Delta. Jell-Bahlsen (2007) notes that the goddess of Oguta Lake “is the major reference point in the daily life of Oguta. She is the mythical mother of the Oru people. Their farming cycle and the timing of their cultural activities revolve around the flooding and receding of the lake and its adjacent rivers” (Nwapa, 1966, p.254).

The goddess requires that her people show respect to their environment and that they pay attention to the cycles of the natural world as they cultivate both the land and the lake. Jell-Bahlsen (2007) points out that Nwapa changes various aspects of the goddess’s identity in that, traditionally, worshippers of Uhamiri do not have to be celibate, nor did they have to be childless, and she reads Nwapa’s heroines, in *Efuru* and her other works, as empowered by a goddess “who supported her followers beyond – not instead of – childbearing” (p. 256). Jell-Bahlsen (2007) notes that “in the changing world of contemporary Oguta, the goddess – and by extension (African) woman – is constantly pushed back and encroached upon by alien ideas, problems, and forces. Nwapa accounts for the destructive forces of globalization, the onslaught of foreign powers and their religions attempting to push Uhamiri’s children into the abyss of derangement” (p. 260).

Nwapa’s alteration of the goddess and her creation of a heroine who exists at the cusp of profound social and environmental upheaval in Nigeria provides an implicit critique of the then-current – 1960s – Nigeria during which the novel was written and also depicts Nwapa’s ambivalence toward western ideological conceptions of religion, environmentalism and gender. But, both in terms of Uhamiri’s status as a hybrid deity and in terms of Nwapa’s alterations of traditional beliefs and ideas about Uhamiri, the goddess requires that her people also keep an eye on the future and that they be able to change to accommodate the forthcoming environmental and social crises that await Nigeria in the second half of the twentieth century.

This paper focused more closely on the ways Nwapa’s and Efuru’s reinterpretation of the worship of the goddess of Oguta Lake allows Efuru to function as a postcolonial, ecofeminist prototype, a woman situated at the historical moment when Igbo women’s matrilineal power was in decline and environmental devastation, particularly as a result of the discovery of oil in Nigeria, was just beyond the horizon. Efuru is a woman whose childlessness and adherence to the taboos of the goddess Uhamiri – to avoid fishing on Orie day (p. 192) and to discourage others from fishing then as well, to avoid sexual activity during certain periods, and to respect the power and sacredness of water – situates her within an historical moment out of which will arise both the rhetoric of population control and the need for conservation of Oguta Lake, the Niger Delta, and Nigeria’s land and resources.

The sets of competing role expectations – the maternal and the conservationist – create conflict within Efuru, however, and she is unable as of the end of the narrative to identify fully the value of a nonmaternal position. In order to explore this situation fully, this paper will put forth the dilemma posed by the narrator at the end of the novel: “Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?” (p. 221). Efuru questions

why women worship Uhamiri, even as her dream is somehow symbolic of her desire to embrace a role other than the one that her culture has chosen for her, that of wife and mother. She cannot, however, understand or observe how the roles of women and men in Igbo society are too concrete to be reasonably challenged. Yet, despite her apparent discomfort with her worship of Uhamiri, Efurú does challenge and reinterpret what it means to be a follower of the goddess.

Interconnectedness of Culture and Nature

In view of the fact that Efurú is chosen, via a prophetic dream, to be a follower of the goddess of the lake, Efurú is allowed an alternate, socially visible existence as a capitalist; she becomes a trader and farmer, and such a social position, in many ways, runs counter to Igbo cultural expectations. Within communal and matrilineal culture women gained status and property by having children who contributed to the well-being of the entire society and were harshly criticized for not having children. For example, when her only child, a daughter that she has with her shiftless first husband, Adizua, dies early in the novel, Efurú is blamed. One of the village women asks Efurú, “in what ways have you offended our ancestors?” (p. 72). Later, Efurú marries a second husband, Gilbert, but fails to have any more children. The village women again function as her fiercest critics claiming, “a woman, a wife, for that matter, should not look glamorous all the time, and not fulfill the important function she is made to fulfill (p. 138).

Omirima says to Gilbert’s mother, “your daughter-in-law is good, but she is childless. She is beautiful but we cannot eat beauty. She is wealthy, but riches cannot go on errands for us” (p. 163). Such continual use of the pronouns “we” and “our” in the above examples and elsewhere throughout the novel point to the communal nature of Igbo society, a culture in which women – literal mothers as well as what Amadiume (2002) refers to as the “matriarchal umbrella” (p. 43) – at once protect women and girls from patriarchal domination while also enforcing such seemingly sexist practices as “the bath” (female circumcision).

Efurú is particularly tagged to be beautiful, but the village women hold her beauty against her when she does not have children. Not only is Efurú denied certain aspects of personhood because she is unable to fulfill the role of mother, she is also denied her womanhood because to her neighbours, she “was a man since she could not reproduce” (p. 24). While Igbo women are bale to exert power in certain situations where their equality is challenged, for example, the effective female uprising that constituted the aforementioned Igbo Women’s War – in the novel, with the exception of Efurú, they do not challenge their marital status. According to Bazin (1985), “those who exert this pressure [to have children as soon as possible] on behalf of the patriarchy are female” (p. 185), and to complicate matters further, Efurú’s female peers first criticize her childlessness, but they alternatively later feel threatened by her pregnancy: when Efurú is pregnant with Ogonim, “women were jealous of her beauty” (p. 28). Initially Omirima, who laments the current generation’s lack of respect for the goddess, scoffs at Efurú’s decision to worship her: “do I hear that [Efurú] now has Uhamiri in her bedroom? Omirima sneered” (p. 162).

Efurú’s subsequent situation as a childless woman is not as bleak as it may appear, even though she acts contrary to convention in many ways, she is still accepted within the traditional framework of Igbo life as a worshipper of Uhamiri. Women obtain power in Igbo society through a system in which gender is separated from sex roles. For example, as *Efurú* makes clear, women are allowed to worship Uhamiri, a goddess who “blesses the community with fish and fresh water and brings them wealth and beauty” (p. 15) yet requires, at least in Nwapa’s interpretation, that her followers be childless. Worshipping Uhamiri allows Efurú to reclaim her femaleness, her beauty, and her very personhood in spite of her childlessness. In a culture where women’s roles are defined by their ability to produce children for the community, such an option implies that certain patriarchal dictates can be transcended, at least by certain “remarkable” women.

Efuru's own mother has died prior to the events that take place in the novel, but her rhetorical presence is felt throughout the work. When Efuru tells her father of her dream of Uhamiri, he says to her, "you are like your mother, my daughter, that's why I love you more than all my children" (p. 150), and when Gilbert accuses Efuru of adultery, she replies, "my mother was not an adulterous woman, neither was her mother, why should I be different?" (p. 219). Just as women function as the fiercest critics of other women's childlessness in the novel, mothers, literal and communal, are alternately blamed and revered for the behaviour of their own as well as the community's daughters. When a girl is an undesirable bride at one point in the narrative, it is because "her mother is a bad woman" (p. 160); conversely, when "girls gave deaf ears to their mothers' warnings" (p. 106) in a narrative told by the storyteller Eneke, spirits capture them.

However, women also act in defense of other women throughout the novel. According to Amadiume (2002), "in addition to their biological mothers, women were . . . provided with a social mother to support them throughout their adult lives" (p. 46), and such a system of support is apparent particularly in Efuru's relationship with Anjanupu, the sister of Adizua's mother, who defends Efuru throughout the novel, despite Efuru's estrangement from Anjanupu's nephew. In postcolonial Nigeria, however, such a framework of female support, Amadiume's "matriarchal umbrella," was severely compromised because ritual and tradition were banned during the colonial period, and I contend that the pivotal role of Uhamiri, read negatively by Amadiume as "a mirage of modernity," "a postcolonial temptress Goddess, contextualized in capitalist materialism" (p. 49), and "a hybrid, a mulatto, stemming from a colonially derived desire for 'whiteness' by colonized African natives" (p. 53), within the narrative points to the need for a new female identity within the text, particularly a powerful, female protector of a most valuable natural resource, Oguta Lake. At its core, Nwapa's novel is about the quest for the Igbo maternal independent of procreation symbolically manifest in Efuru and Uhamiri at a time when religious beliefs, the environment and women's role were compromised by white influence.

According to McNeil (2000), "Royal Dutch Shell and British Petroleum (Shell-BP), which had been granted exploration licenses by the British colonial government, struck oil [in the Niger delta] in 1956," and oil production began in the 1960s (p. 301). The water and farmland utilized by fishing and farming inhabitants of the region, particularly the Ogoni people, were polluted and rendered useless, and the Nigerian, military government dealt harshly with any complaints from local inhabitants. By the 1990s the government derived 80 to 90 percent of its revenue from oil, and in 1992 the United Nations declared the Niger delta "to be the most ecologically endangered delta" (p. 304) in the World. Furthermore, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries Nigeria as a whole (and Igboland in particular) has been faced with a variety of environmental stressors. According to the world Igbo Environmental Foundation, "Southeast Nigeria and contiguous territories in the Niger delta...are ravaged by the worst combination of environmental degradation known to modern man.

The area, which belongs to the equatorial rainforest belt of West Africa, has a population density that is second only to the Nile Delta in Egypt. Pressure to procure land for essential human development activities has resulted in deforestation and overcultivation of almost all available land space in the area." As earlier stated, by getting Efuru in the 1940s, Nwapa does not have to engage in any direct way with the environmental implications of the issues cited above, since these circumstances postdate the events in her narrative. However, the novel's focus on the role of Uhamiri points to both the environmental significant that bodies of water serve as well as the way the natural environment, prior to discovery of oil in the NigerDelta in 1956, is conceptualized, deified, and sustained in Igbo life.

In her first dream of Uhamiri, Efuru claims, "I go to the bottom of the lake and . . . I saw an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb. When she saw me, she stopped combing her hair and smiled at me and asked me to come in. I went in. She offered me kola, I refused to take, and she laughed and did not persuade me. She beckoned me to follow her. I followed her like a

woman possessed” (p. 146). As I stated earlier, the presentation of this deity elicits concern from critics who view Uhamiri as a product of colonial influence. Nwankwo (1995), for example, is critical of Nwapa’s decision of the female divinity, claiming that “Uhamiri, the goddess of stability and supposedly unstopped kindness, is for devotees, like deities everywhere, in explicably ineffectual” (p. 49) according to Amadiume (2002), this depiction of Uhamiri is “European and not African. She is without family or children and is totally outside any social system” (53); furthermore, “white women, capitalist goods and Western power become unattainable objects of desire that are represented in [Uhamiri], whose images efface those of indigenous African matriarchs” (p. 63). Such criticism seems in direct conflict with another of Nwankwo’s (1995) assertions that “the historical markers for [colonial] trauma are unfortunately absent” (p. 49) in Nwapa’s narrative, and Andrade’s (1990) claim that Nwapa’s depiction of the water goddess is free from Western influence: “that Efuru’s life appears to have no contact with Europe . . . means that the narrative’s proto-type of female power is Igbo – a powerful statement in the face of a post-world-war feminism that implied the global liberation of women would begin in the ‘West’” (pp. 98-99). Such contradictory claims point to the difficulty of historians and literary critics alike to adequately position Uhamiri within Igbo culture.

Jell-Bahlsen (2007) in his article, *The water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Oguide of Oguta Lake* is perhaps the definitive text on this deity’s significance within Igbo culture, reads the goddess as absolutely precolonial in her origins. Jell-Bahlsen’s text examines, in great detail, Igbo environmental consciousness as it is dictated by Oguide (another name for Uhamiri or Mammy Water) and notes that “recognizing the mother water goddess and her powers” alters our perceptions of “nature, power, and gender” (p. 1). Jell-Bahlsen (2007) claims that the prominence of the fluid nature of the goddess provides counterbalance to the static forms of male divinity, and she provides a detailed reading of the ways that, by carefully observing the flooding and receding of the waters of Oguta Lake and as a result of a series of taboos established in conjunction with these natural cycles of ebb and flow, the Igbo “have learned to observe and maintain their vital natural resources through skillful resource management” (p. 49).

The Igbo, she asserts, recognize water as both a resource and as a sacred, life-pre-serving-and life-destroying-entity: they “feel indebted, know how to fear, but also thank and preserve their lake, rivers, and entire environment” (p. 249) through family planning. “sanctions, sanctuaries, and indigenous cultivation techniques” (p. 253). In fact, Jell-Bahlsen (2007) links the water goddess to all aspects of environmental conservation practiced by the Igbo, including observation of lake levels in the initiation of annual farming cycles, shifting yam cultivation to ensure a seven-year period to allow farmland to recover, moderation of slash-and-burn land clearance, and the inter-planting of different crops as a form of pest control.

Furthermore, the Igbo practice strict conservation of medicinal plants and sacred groves, and they protect specific animals sacred to the goddess – the crocodile and turtle, for example – from being hunted (pp. 251-54). On the other hand, domestic animals “are slaughtered only in sacrifice, in exchange for a human life, for no life owed to the mother water goddess is to be taken randomly” (p. 260). Finally, in keeping with the dictates of the goddess, Igbo couples space the birth of children at three-year intervals (p. 280), as women are required to abstain from intercourse for two and a half years after the birth of a child. Initiated worshippers of the goddess also abstain from sexual activity on Orié day, the day of the Igbo week devoted to Uhamiri (p. 280).

During the time Nwapa wrote *Efuru*, environmental devastation resulting to oil drilling has been one of Nigeria’s main concerns. Nigerian writers and activists have been at the forefront of the movement to stem the environmental devastation, often suffering horrific consequences. In 1995, for example, Ogoni writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed for protesting Shell Oil’s environmental devastation of the Niger River Delta before he was hanged. Saro-Wiwa stated, “the ecological war that the Company has waged in the Delta will be called to question sooner than later and the crimes of that war be duly

punished. The crime of the Company's dirty wars against the Ogoni people will also be punished" (Baxter, Horsman, and Kretzmann, 2006).

According to the World Lakes Database, Oguta Lake is located within the equatorial rainforest belt, but at the current moment, "most of the rain forest has been replaced by oil palm plantations especially around the lake" (International Lake Environment Committee). The lake continues to function as a major source of drinking water and of fish, but the water and ecosystems within the lake are currently endangered by the fact that the lake is used as a septic pool for domestic sewage and because local people dredge sand from the lake to use in construction. Most significant in terms of this study, however, is the assertion by the International Lake Environment Committee Foundation for Sustainable Management of World Lakes and Reservoirs that despite the implementation of recent environmental protection laws, their enforcement has been a problem because neither the enforcement agents nor the citizens are sufficiently educated with regard to environmental protection of the lake.

Conclusions

Efuru ends with the dilemma earlier quoted, and such dilemmas are characteristic of Oral African literature. The dilemma is dialogic, inviting the reader to enter the narrative and participate in the debate posed by the narrator. The narrator says of Efuru's final dream of Uhamiri, "she was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?" (p. 221). Many critics have engaged, the worship of Uhamiri contradicts the Igbo cosmological belief that, according to Edeh (1985), "the power of production is the only true power a being has The Earth has her native power of fertility by which she produces The Earth, because of its fertility, is the archetype of all forms of maternity" (p. 44).

To worship Nwapa's reinterpretation of Uhamiri is at once to embrace certain aspects of Western culture but also to be environmentally responsible in ways that allow Nwapa, through the character of Efuru and her counterpart the Lake Goddess, to speak prophetically about Nigerian environmental crises during the twentieth century and beyond. The balance that Uhamiri asks her worshippers to strike between the excesses of capitalism and the religious proscriptions of Igbo culture is mediated by two dictates in Nwapa's novel and in Igbo cosmology: family planning and conservation of resources in the face of colonial environmental exploitation; as earlier stated, one of Uhamiri's taboos is that her worshippers must not fish on Orie day and must encourage others not to fish on this day as well. Such a policy would certainly have direct implications for reducing overfishing of the lake and would promote the environmental consciousness that the worshippers of Uhamiri – in the present day context – seem, according to the International Lake Environment Committee's report, uniquely inclined to champion. Uhamiri is a hybrid goddess, implicated in capitalist exchange and demanding the observance of her taboos, but such hybridity is necessary in terms of female mythmaking, narrative reclamation, and environment survival.

References

- Amadiume, I. (2002). Bodies, choices, globalizing national enchantments: African matriarchs and mummy water. *Meridians* 2.2., pp. 41-66.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Andrade, S. Z. (1990). Rewriting history, Motherhood and rebellion: Naming an African women's literary tradition. *Research in African Literatures* 21.1, pp. 91-110.

- Baxter, C, Paul. H; & Steve, K. (March 9, 2006). Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni people executed: Blood on shell's hands. 10 Nov. 1995. Greenspace Archive. <http://archive.greenspace.org/comms/ken/murder.html>.
- Bazin, N.T. (1985). Weight of custom, signs of change: Feminism in the literature of African women. *World Literature Written in English* 25.2, pp. 183-97.
- Edeh, E.M. P. (1985). *Towards an Igbo metaphysics*. New Orleans: Loyola UP.
- Egbo, B. (2000). *Gender, literacy and life chances in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Bristol, Pa.: Multilingual Matters.
- Jell-Bahlsen, S. (2007). Flora Nwapa and Oguta's Lake Goddess. *Dialectical Anthropology*. 31.1-3, pp. 253-62.
- McNeil, J. R. (2000). *Something new under the sun: An environmental history of the Twentieth-Century World*. New York: Norton.
- Nwapa, F. (1966). *Efuru*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Nwankwo, C. (1995). The Igbo word in Flora Nwapa's craft. *Research in African Literatures* 26.2, pp. 42-52.
- Wright, L. (2010). *Wilderness into civilized shapes: Reading the postcolonial environment*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia.