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A Pugnacious Book¹

Jell-Bahlsen, Sabine, *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), XIV + 433 pp., 118 black and white photographs, glossary, bibliography, index; ISBN 1-59221-482-7 (cloth); ISBN 1-59221-483-5 (paper), US\$ 34.95

Context

The numerous Mami Wata cults, found all along the coast of West Africa from Senegal to South Africa and in the Atlantic African diaspora, constitute a fascinating field of study for the anthropology and iconography of the indigenous religions of Africa, as Drewal's survey demonstrates (Drewal 2008). The anthropologist and filmmaker Sabine Jell-Bahlsen also contributed a chapter to Drewal's volume (Jell-Bahlsen 2008). She is also known for the four documentary films she produced, one of which is about Mami Wata worship and healing in Southeastern Nigeria (Jell-Bahlsen 1989/1991), as are six of her articles (Jell-Bahlsen 1985, 1995, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000). The book reviewed is the outcome of the author's attempt to 'bring together my numerous, scattered articles [and papers read at conferences] on different individual aspects on this research to arrive at a conclusive and complete portrayal' (9n4) of the cult of the goddess of Oguta Lake at Orsu-Obodo and Oguta in the Niger delta. That goddess is variously known as Uhammiri, Ogbuide, and Mami Wata.

Content

The book consists of an introduction and twenty-five chapters. It is difficult to detect an order in them, but I may summarise them as follows. Chapters 1, 3, and 17 deal with Oru-Igbo traditional society, its three annual festivals and their integration with Oru-Igbo water based ecology. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 deal explicitly with gender, and especially with the position of women in patrilineal, male-dominated Oru-Igbo society. This gender issue, however, crops up in all her chapters. The introduction, and chapters 1 to 8 and 12 to 22 deal with aspects of the cult of the lake goddess, traditionally held to provide women with children and wealth. Chapter 23 and 24 are on 'religious colonialism'. And chapter 25 is about the famous Igbo novelist, Flora Nwapa, and how she portrays Ogbuide in her novels.

The author's claim to 'prolonged and repeated in-depth field research [...] and an ongoing relationship with the people of Orsu-Obodo and Oguta over more than twenty years, 1970-1994' (1) caused another reviewer to credit her with 'twenty-five years of research in southeastern Nigeria' and to praise her book on that account as 'by far the most comprehensive and carefully researched work to date on the female water deity known as Ogbuide in the town of Oguta, Nigeria - more popularly known throughout sub-Saharan Africa as Mami Wata' (Carwile 2008: 172). Actually, the author documents herself in endnotes to the chapters that she spent less than a year and a half in fieldwork at Oguta – from November 1978 (30n8) tot June 1979 (103n29); from October (31n19) to mid-December 1988 (318n22); from late March (187n8) to mid-April 1989 (126n1) -, which she supplemented by three brief visits in 1991, 1992, and 1994 (167n18). And she writes that she was taught only the 'basics of Igbo language' (XIII).

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For a number of reasons, detailed below, I disagree with Carwhile's praise. The book, however, has at least one virtue: it insists on the indigeneity of the cult of lake goddess, as is apparent from the fact that Ogbuide also has a few male priests who have inherited that office (301, 350; figs. 1, 5). It is, therefore, older than the Mami Wata cult, with which it fused only in the 20th century. At the time of the author's fieldwork, however, Ogbuide mainly had priests, and especially priestesses, by 'vocation' – that is by being possessed – rather than by inheritance (161-162).

The paradigmatic example in the book of such a priestess by vocation is Mrs. Martha Mberekpe of Orsu-Obodo (fig. 2), whom the author reveres as her 'spiritual mother' (1). After eleven miscarriages (132, 283n21) and a mental breakdown, Martha had been 'healed' by initiation, through spirit possession, into the priesthood of the local female and male water deities (267, 287-289). As *Eze Mmiri*, 'water-queen', she had begun to treat clients with physical, mental and social problems (291-315) in her compound – 'which was then like a mental hospital' (313) –, and to lead a small congregation of 'water people' (*Ndi Mmiri*) of mainly women (351) that met regularly for worship at her home, or on the waterside, or on the lake, or in secret groves 'under a giant tree, deep inside a thicket of smaller trees and wild bush' (107-111). These cult groups are now 'popularly known as *Mammy Water*' (72) through the fusion of the Ogbuide with 'the white temptress of foreign origin' (205-207) – depicted either as a mermaid with the fishtail or as the seductive Polynesian snake handling girl with long curly hair – and in the company of a male, tri-headed Hindu god (347-351).

The author greatly deplores these 'foreign icons' (347) for two reasons. One is that these '20th century accretions' caused academic (346-347), literary (385-395) and popular views (347-350) to become dominant of Ogbuide/Mammy Water as the goddess who grants wealth in return for sexual abstinence (349, 389, 392), and as one who takes children away (36). These views conflict fundamentally with that of the author. She maintains that Ogbuide is first and foremost a goddess who grants fertility to women and provides them with both children and wealth (117-128, 387, 391) – though she does admit that Ogbuide is regarded also as a 'killer-beauty' who may take children away (129-136). The author therefore terms Flora Nwapa's depiction of the lake goddess in her novels as providing women with wealth at the expense of their childlessness, 'preposterous' (389).

Another reason why I am critical of this book is her great enemy: 'religious colonialism' (6). The author laments that the Mammy Water 'accretions' expose the cult of water-goddesses to the 'vicious' (346, 369, 391) attacks of 'fanatic' Christians (6, 34, 125, 187, 193, 287, 303, 364-367, 369, 372, 373, 374, 391) and 'aggressive churches' (244, 317, 350, 360-366, 369-375). It provides them, she says, with fuel for derision, demonization and cultural rape (204, 285, 354, 359, 365-366, 375, 387-388, 390); and it causes scares that Mammy Water abducts children (132, 135n8, 362-363, 387). Throughout her book the author conducts a running war with 'the onslaught of the monolithic power structures fuelled by [male] monotheism' (357), under which label she indiscriminately groups Christians of every hue as well as Muslims. She regrets that a hereditary priest of Ogbuide 'caved in' (350) to religious colonialism by becoming a Catholic. Thereby he sided, she says, with 'the crusade of death and destruction [of] fanatic Christian evangelism' (6) against African indigenous beliefs. Says the author: 'These conflicts [...] run like a trail of poison [...] in contemporary [...] life in Oguta – reflecting the painful tensions spread by fanatics who inject their venom into almost every home and family, sparing nobody, and no social level in contemporary Oguta' (374). The worship of the goddess Ogbuide, 'that was once basic to the local people's very existence was [thereby] relegated to the margins of society and into the realm of psychic disorders' (375).

Chapters 3 and 17 are on ecology, natural resources and sustainability and seem more especially of interest to the readers of *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. The author is again quite outspoken. She maintains that views that 'recognise the divine in nature [are] diametrically opposed to the dominating, materialistic, instrumental, and commercial thinking of the Western industrialized world'; and also that 'behavioral codes based on spiritually sanctioned ethics [such as imposed by Ogbuide] are most effective for protecting all of nature' (250).

However, the upshot of these chapters is that although Ogbuide's rules might objectively (251, 259, 260, 261, 262; also 275, 276, 277, 281) result in some benefits for the environment if they were obeyed, they do so now at most only accidentally and unwittingly (276, 277). The author admits, regretfully, that their observation does not result 'subjectively' (251, 281) in behaviour that aims to consciously maintain or restore biodiversity, as is clear from the violation of 'spiritual wildlife sanctuaries' (257) by her worshippers building two temples of concrete, steel and corrugated iron for Ogbuide in groves sacred to her (109-113, fig. 46b).

Appreciation

This is a book by a pugnacious Marxist anthropologist who does not look dispassionately at religious developments in Igbo-Oru society but explicitly takes sides in them. To some extent one may condone that, and look for what is revealed by such polemical, biased analysis. The book, however, is also poorly organised, far too long, and excessively self-referential. The publisher has done her a disservice by publishing the book as it stands.

Recommendation

Even so, the book is of interest to scholars of the Mammy Wata cults for the peculiar position taken by the author, and perhaps also to scholars interested in religion-nature-culture interactions in an African context, as I have indicated above when discussing chapters 3 and 17.

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