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About *Matrix*

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies (Matrix) is an open-access, peer-reviewed and refereed scholarly journal published by the International Network for Training, Education, and Research on Culture (Network on Culture), Canada. *Matrix* is published online twice yearly (Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer).

Matrix is a new journal in the humanities and social sciences, founded to provide an interdisciplinary forum for those who are working from the theoretical stance of matriculture as a Geertzian cultural system. Matriculture refers to the cultural system that brings together all cultural aspects informing the lives of mothers, usually women, of a given society, and by extension, the lives of women. Talking about matricultural systems allows us to consider as primary the cultural context of a given society as perceived, constructed, and lived by its women.

Similar to other cultural systems such as art, religion, or mathematics, employing the heuristic of matriculture allows for, among other things: cross-cultural comparisons; fresh insights into the social roles of women, men, otherwise identified, children, and the entire community of humans, animals, and the environment; and/or renewed understandings of historically mis-labelled cultures. With Guédon's work in mind, then, and based on Geertzian principles, the concept of matriculture is both a model of reality by rendering the structure of matricultures apprehensible and a model for reality, where psychological relationships are organized under its guidance.

We encourage submissions from scholars around the world who are ready to take a new look at the ways in which people - historically and currently - have organized meaningful relationships amongst themselves and with the natural environment, the myths, customs, and laws which support these relationships, and the ways in which researchers have documented and perhaps mis-labeled the matricultures they have encountered.

For more information about *Matrix*, visit our website at <https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix>

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Women and Water: The Flow of Matricultures

Introduction

(English)

LINNÉA ROWLATT and MARIE-FRANÇOISE GUÉDON

Fluid and frozen. Yielding and relentless. Ferocious and calm. Sweet and salty. Paradoxical qualities such as these, among others, are attributed to both women and water in many cultures, including the European and parts of the Asian world. Systems of thought supported by ancient mythologies, particularly, perhaps, those exhibiting explicit dualism, create chains of metaphorical associations between woman and water through passivity, fluidity, moisture, the moon, and the maternal breast—all essential elements for life but effectively reductive. These symbolic chains are taken up at all cultural levels, giving them a near-universal value, even in scientific language. The oceans, for example, are known as the ‘cradle of life,’ while in our wombs, women carry the amniotic fluid that nourishes and protects those born human. The breaking of a woman’s water is a clear indication that the baby is ready to be born. Water as a metaphor for women.

The proximity between the semantic fields associated with women, on the one hand, and water, on the other, is taken for granted by nearly half of the world’s cultures. Although assumed to be universal by those who propose it, this relationship, and the metaphors that support it, depend on the cultural context: In particular, mythologies, as well as religious and ritual systems, offer privileged access to the diversity of this relationship. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this: With all due respect to European psychoanalysis, primordial waters are not essentially feminine. The deities of the ocean and the sea, such as Poseidon in Greece, Watatsumi in Japan, or Wadj-wer (Uatch-ur) in ancient Egypt, prove that they are as likely to be masculine as feminine. Among the Inuit, the sea and the moon, as well as cold and darkness, are male, while



the feminine is associated with the sun, heat, dryness, and light. In the Athapaskan story of the blind man and the loon (also known among the Inuit, and Algonquian-speaking peoples, among other peoples of North America), the loon (whose gender does not appear to be important) immerses the blind man in the healing waters of a lake (without gender connotation); the villain of the story is a woman (who is either his sister, his wife, or his mother).¹ Here, water is not conjoined with the woman, and moreover, the earth is not perceived as a maternal or feminine figure. It should also be noted that in Athapaskan languages, gender - masculine, feminine, or other - is not indicated. We generally speak in the neutral gender, adding a term if necessary to indicate whether it is male or female.

In some Alpine cemeteries, the graves of climbers feature a sculpture of the mountain where they died, and it is the mountains (rather than bodies of water) that are anthropomorphized and considered feminine and responsible for the deaths of those they love too much. Moreover, in certain myths and rituals in Bali, Indonesia, women are both idealized mothers and cruel ogresses, an attitude Margaret Mead attributed to the fact that mothers were often unable to breastfeed on demand due to their other responsibilities in the fields (babies were cared for by their older sisters, awaiting the return of the mother and the maternal breast)—hence the infant's frustration and ambivalent attitude toward the mother. This underlines that the mother, or woman, is not necessarily seen as a nurturer.

Let us therefore remember that water can be antagonistic, active in its manifestations (from brackish waters to tidal waves, including storms, floods, and monsoons, or simply drowning, a form of sacrifice dear to Celtic goddesses). But paradoxically, it is the symbolic link (dear to patriarchal societies) between women, water, and social and mental passivity that has provoked the most damage to the social fabric by maintaining women in a symbolically and socially subordinate position, a position that the matricultural context must take into account. From the perspective of cultural systems analysis, the matricultural is the cultural system that gives meaning to terms such as *woman*, *mother*, *female*, or *bitch*, as well as to all the terms associated with them. The heuristic of the matricultural allows us, among other things, to explore local specificities of expressions of symbolic links between the notion of woman and the notion of water, and in particular the ways in which the symbolic chains, metaphors, and images that nourish the concrete relationships between women and the aquatic realm are reinterpreted.

These relationships are deep and fluid, informing the definition of the feminine, the roles assigned to women, and the very perception of life. This issue of *Matrix* seeks to explore certain aspects of these relationships and the ways in which women interpret symbolic systems to position themselves as actors in the great concrete game of relationships with the environment as a whole. In this issue, our authors examine the relationship between women and water

1 Marie-Françoise Guéron, *Le rêve et la forêt. Histoire de chamanes nabesna* (Laval: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005), 34-35, 530.

among peoples of North America, Northern Europe, Cameroon, the Italian Alps, and Nigeria. Through mythology, personal experience, art, and ritual, they explore the different expressions of this relationship, which constitutes an important part of the lives of communities past and present.

The first of six research contributions in this issue, 'Yanawana Pedagogies: Learning with Coahuiltecan Water Teachings,' presents the traditional Water knowledge of the Coahuiltecan Native American community of northeastern Mexico and southern Texas. The authors, Marissa Aki'nene Muñoz, Pablo Montes, and Marleen Villanueva, reflect on their roles as water protectors, mothers, educators, and community organizers, and invite us to remember our responsibilities not only to the world's Waters, but also to what we pour into and impose on them - not least our own inner waters.

Many societies contain legends about living beings that can take on both human and animal forms. Sarah E. McFarland presents the selkie—at once seal and human, and thus aquatic and terrestrial. In her contribution, 'Metamorphosing with Selkies: Shape-Shifting Instabilities in the Self-Conscious Anthropocene,' she presents the selkie as a champion of a non-hierarchical and sustainable coexistence of humans, other living beings, and ecosystems. Selkies, she argues, are situated in a liminal space that exemplifies a radical diminution of human exceptionalism; their nonbinary nature encourages us to reconsider our species' swaggering and destructive passage across our planet. Part prose, part poetry, McFarland presents the seal-wife's perspective as an intentional way of reintegrating ourselves into the living world.

Our third article, 'It Flows From the Heart: *Kiinoomaagewag nibi manidoog*,' is by Barbara Moktthewenkwe Wall, Bodwewaadmii Anishnaabekwe, who shares with us Knowledge from the water spirits. She expresses her gratitude by describing how the Anishnaabekwewag acquire their community knowledge through their relationships with the Anishnaabe water spirits, who are considered elders, and some of the ways they honour these extended kinship ties. Concluding with a portrait of the Nibi Manidoog who watch over the water, Wall grounds the Anishnaabekwewag in their community teachings.

Etim Ekpenyong Mfon's contribution, 'Water, an Agent of Purification and Life Sustenance: The Relationships of Women with Water in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria,' explores the similarities and differences between water-related rituals among the Yoruba, Edo, and Egbo peoples. By highlighting women's involvement in these rituals and their cultural significance, Mfon highlights the connections between the practical and ritual uses of water. Illustrated with paintings and photographs, the article confirms the indispensable and active contribution of Igbo, Yoruba, and Edo women to the maintenance of their cultures, matricultural systems, and societies.

In his article 'Women and Rainfall: An Eco-ritual Among the Alps of the Past,' Dario Bassi focuses the discussion on an in-depth exploration of a single ritual, the skull-washing of Albosaggia, Italy. Bassi provides the religious, environmental, economic, and hydrological contexts of this ritual

performed by elderly women to manipulate the rainfall, whether to cause it or stop it. He deploys little-known texts to conclude that this practice should be identified as an *eco-ritual*, as well as a culturally unique form of agency for these women of the Italian Alps.

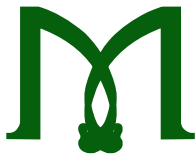
Our final research article is by Henry Kam Kah, 'Ehzele Laimbwe and Water Rituals in the North West region of Cameroon,' where he describes the rites and rituals that centralize the role of Laimbwe women. Kah explores these rituals, which are aimed at fertility and healing, as well as community protection, from two different meanings of the term *matriculture*—that of Irene Friesen Wolfstone and that of Marie-Françoise Guédon. He concludes that, despite the challenges posed by Christian mission activities in the region, the Ehzele Laimbwe can both honour their ancestral traditions and create a dynamic synthesis of these traditions combined with the demands of contemporary society.

We are pleased that this issue of Matrix includes three creative contributions: a watershed painting, a photograph, and fibre artwork. Jessica Marion Barr's *Odenabe (the river that beats like a heart) Watershed* revises and remaps the watershed around Nogojiwanong ('the place at the foot of the rapids' in Nishinaabemowin, aka Peterborough, Ontario) using paint created from aquatic plants harvested from a nearby river. That the colour evokes dried menstrual blood may be purely coincidental; the beauty of the work, however, calls up the beauty of the Canadian Shield.

Greta Ciūnytė's photograph *Fragile Items* represents water as a medium for holding relationships, both with herself and her own feelings and, more complicatedly, with her father. With both joyous and frightening memories of him, elements in the photo evoke kindness and an openness for connection. With *The Finnish water mother Veen Emo*, Kaarina Kailo transcends both geography and personal experience to evoke the Mother Goddess of the Water World, Creatrix of the world, along with Ilmatar, Daughter of Air. Kailo's fibre art summons a textured, layered world that is firmly situated in a watery environment.

The final part of the issue features three book reviews: Carla Ionescu reviews Barbara Alice Mann and Kaarina Kailo's *The Woman Who Married the Bear: The Spirituality of the Ancient Foremothers* (2023); Adriana Kortlandt reviews Heide Göttner-Abendroth's *Matriarchal Societies: Research on Indigenous Cultures Across the World* (2019); and Umasom Amos reviews Laura S. Grillo's *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa* (2018).

The final contribution is an obituary prepared by Lisa Crandall and Donna McIlveen for the Reverend Dr. Cheryl Gaver, a colleague and friend of the *Matrix* editorial team. We are again impressed by the wide-ranging skills, generosity, and kindness that characterized Cheryl's work; proud to have been her colleagues, we offer this obituary as a final tribute to her work and life.



Les femmes et l'eau : Le flux des systèmes matriculturels

Introduction

(français)

LINNÉA ROWLATT et MARIE-FRANÇOISE GUÉDON

Fluide et figée. Souple et implacable. Féroce et calme. Douce et salée. Des attributs paradoxaux tels que ceux-ci, entre autres, sont attribués à la fois aux femmes et à l'eau dans de nombreuses cultures, y compris le monde européen et une partie du monde asiatique. Des systèmes de pensée soutenus par des mythologies anciennes, en particulier, peut-être, ceux qui exhibent un dualisme explicite créent des chaînes d'associations métaphoriques entre la femme et l'eau en passant par la passivité, la fluidité, l'humidité, la lune et le sein maternel, tout éléments indispensables à la vie mais potentiellement réducteurs. Ces chaînes symboliques sont reprises à tous les niveaux culturels, ce qui leur confère une valeur quasi universelle y compris dans le langage scientifique. Les océans, par exemple, sont connus comme le « berceau de la vie », tandis que dans notre ventre, les femmes portent le liquide amniotique qui nourrit et protège ceux qui naissent humains. La rupture de la poche des eaux d'une femme est une indication claire que le bébé est prêt à naître. Ceci dit, l'eau en tant que métaphore de la femme.

La proximité entre les champs sémantiques associés à la femme, d'une part, et à l'eau, d'autre part est prise pour acquise par près de la moitié des cultures du monde. Bien que supposée universelle par ceux qui la proposent, cette relation, et les métaphores qui la



soutiennent, dépendent du contexte culturel : En particulier, les mythologies, ainsi que les systèmes religieux et rituels, offrent un accès privilégié à la diversité de cette relation.

Quelques exemples suffiront à la démontrer: N'en déplaise à la psychanalyse européenne, les eaux primordiales ne sont pas nécessairement féminines. Les divinités de l'océan et de la mer, comme Poséidon en Grèce, Watatsumi au Japon ou Wadj-wer (Uatch-ur) en Égypte antique, prouvent que celles-ci sont aussi susceptibles d'être masculines que féminines. Chez les Inuit, la mer et la lune ainsi que le froid et l'obscurité sont du domaine des hommes, tandis que le féminin est associé au soleil, à la chaleur, au sec et à la lumière. Dans le récit athapascan de l'aveugle et du huard (aussi connu chez les Inuits, et les gens de langues algonquiennes entre autres peuples de l'Amérique du Nord), le huard (dont le genre n'apparaît pas important) immerge l'aveugle dans des eaux curatives d'un lac (sans connotation de genre); la vilaine de l'histoire est une femme (qui est soit sa sœur, soit son épouse, soit sa mère).¹ Ici, l'eau n'est pas conjointe à la femme, et de plus la terre n'est pas non plus perçue comme une figure maternelle ou féminine. Mentionnons par ailleurs que dans les langues athapaskannes, le genre, masculin, féminin ou autre, n'est pas indiqué; on parle généralement au neutre en ajoutant au besoin le terme indiquant qu'il s'agit d'un mâle ou d'une femelle.

Dans certains cimetières alpins, les tombes des alpinistes comportent une sculpture de la montagne où ils sont morts, et ce sont les montagnes (plutôt que les plans d'eau) que l'on anthropomorphise et considère comme féminines et responsables de la mort de ceux qu'elles aiment trop. Par ailleurs, dans certains mythes et rituels à Bali, Indonésies, les femmes sont à la fois mères idéalisées et ogresses cruelles, une attitude que Margaret Mead attribuait au fait que les mères étaient souvent incapables d'allaiter sur demande en raison de leurs autres responsabilités dans les champs (les bébés étaient gardés par leurs sœurs aînées, en attendant le retour de la mère et du sein maternel... d'où la frustration du nourrisson et l'attitude ambivalente envers la mère. Ce qui souligne que la mère, ou la femme, n'est pas nécessairement vue comme nourricière.

Rappelons donc que l'eau peut être antagoniste, active dans ses manifestations (des eaux saumâtres aux ras-de marée, en passant par les tempêtes, les inondations et les moussons, ou simplement les noyades, une forme de sacrifice chère aux déesses celtes). Mais c'est paradoxalement le lien symbolique cher aux sociétés patriarcales entre la femme, l'eau et la passivité sociale et mentale qui a causé le plus de tort au tissu social en maintenant les femmes dans une position symboliquement et socialement subordonnée, position dont le contexte matriculturel doit tenir compte.

1 Marie-Françoise Guédon, *Le rêve et la forêt. Histoire de chamanes nabesna* (Laval: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005), 34-35, 530.

Du point de vue de l'analyse des systèmes culturels, le matriculturel est le système culturel qui donne un sens à des termes comme *femme*, *mère*, *femelle*, ou *garce*, ainsi qu'à tous les termes qui leur sont associés. La notion de matriculturel nous permet entre autre de rejoindre les spécificités locales des expressions du lien symbolique entre la notion de femme et la notion de l'eau, et en particulier des modalités de réinterprétation des chaînes symboliques, des métaphores et des images qui nourrissent les relations concrètes entre les femmes et le domaine aquatique.

Ces relations sont profondes et fluides au sein de cultures aussi disparates que les Anishinaabe de l'est du Canada, les Celtes d'Europe et les Ashanti d'Afrique de l'Ouest, et elles nourrissent la définition du féminin, les rôles attribués aux femmes, et la perception-même du vivant. Ce numéro de *Matrix* cherche à explorer certains aspects de ces relations et les façons dont les femmes interprètent les systèmes symboliques pour se positionner en tant qu'actrices dans le grand jeu concret des relations avec l'environnement dans son ensemble.

Dans ce numéro, nos auteurs examinent la relation entre les femmes et l'eau chez des peuples de l'Amérique du Nord, du Nord de l'Europe, au Cameroon, puis dans les Alpes italiennes, en enfin au Nigéria. À travers la mythologie, l'expérience personnelle, l'art et les rituels, ils explorent les différentes expressions de cette relation, qui constitue une part importante de la vie des communautés d'hier et d'aujourd'hui. La première des six contributions de recherche de ce numéro, « Yanawana Pedagogies : Learning with Coahuiltecan Water Teachings » (Pédagogies Yanawana : Apprendre avec les 'Savoir de l'eau' coahuiltèques), présente les savoirs traditionnels sur l'eau de la communauté amérindienne coahuiltèque du nord-est du Mexique et du sud du Texas. Les auteurs, Marissa Aki'nene Muñoz, Pablo Montes, et Marleen Villanueva transforment leur parcours d'éducatrices en réfléchissant à leurs rôles de protectrices de l'eau, d'éducateurs, d'animatrices communautaires, et nous invitent par ailleurs à nous souvenir de nos responsabilités non seulement envers les eaux du monde, mais aussi envers ce que nous déversons dans l'eau et lui imposons, y compris nos propres eaux intérieures.

On trouve dans de nombreuses sociétés des légendes sur des êtres vivants qui peuvent adopter tantôt une forme humaine, tantôt une forme animale. Sarah E. McFarland présente la selkie - à la fois phoque et humaine, et donc aquatique et terrestre. Dans sa contribution « Metamorphosing with Selkies: Shape-Shifting Instabilities in the Self-Conscious Anthropocene » (Métamorphose avec les Selkies : instabilités changeantes dans l'Anthropocène conscient de lui-même), elle présente la selkie comme la championne d'une coexistence non hiérarchique et durable des humains, des autres êtres vivants, et des éco-systèmes. Les selkies, soutient-elle, se situent dans un espace liminal qui exemplifie une diminution radicale de l'exceptionnalisme humain; leur nature non binaire nous encourage à reconsidérer le passage plastronnant et destructeur de notre espèce à travers notre planète. Entre prose et poésie, McFarland présente le point de vue de

l'épouse-phoque comme un moyen intentionnel de nous réintégrer au monde vivant.

Notre troisième article, « It Flows From the Heart: *Kiinoomaagewag nibi manidoog* » (Ça coule du cœur : *Kiinoomaagewag nibi manidoog*), est de Barbara Moktthewenkwe Wall, Bodwewaadmii Anishnaabekwe, qui partage avec nous un Savoir provenant des esprits de l'eau. Elle exprime sa gratitude en décrivant comment le savoir de sa communauté est acquis par les Anishnaabekwewag au moyen leurs relations avec les esprits du monde aquatique anishnaabe, considérés comme des aînés, ainsi que certaines de leurs façons d'honorer ces liens de parenté étendue. Concluant par un portrait des Nibi Manidoog qui veillent sur l'eau, Wall ancre les Anishnaabekwewag dans les enseignements de leur communauté.

La contribution d'Etim Ekpenyong Mfon, « Water, an Agent of Purification and Life Sustenance: The Relationships of Women with Water in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria » (L'eau, agent de purification et substance vitale : Les relations des femmes avec l'eau dans les provinces du sud du Nigéria) explore les similitudes et les différences entre les rituels liés à l'eau chez les peuples Yoruba, Edo, et Egbo. En soulignant l'implication des femmes dans ces rituels et leur importance culturelle, Mfon met en lumière les liens entre les usages pratiques et les usages rituels de l'eau. Illustré de peintures et de photographies, l'article confirme la contribution indispensable et active des femmes Igbo, Yoruba et Edo au maintien de leurs cultures système matriculturel et de leur société.

Dans son article « Women and Rainfall: an *Eco-ritual* Among the Alps of the Past » (Les femmes et la pluie : un *éco-rituel* dans les Alpes du passé), Dario Bassi concentre la discussion sur une exploration approfondie d'un seul rituel, le lavage de crânes d'Albosaggia, en Italie. Bassi fournit les contextes religieux, environnemental, économique et hydrologique de ce rituel, tenu par des femmes âgées, pour manipuler les pluies, qu'il s'agisse de les provoquer ou de les arrêter. Là où les archives sont silencieuses, il déploie des textes peu connus, pour conclure que cette pratique devrait être identifiée comme un éco-rituel ainsi qu'une forme culturellement unique d'agentivité de ces femmes des Alpes italiennes.

Notre dernier article de recherche est celui de Henry Kam Kah, « *Ehzele* Laimbwe and Water Rituals in the North West Region of Cameroon » (*Ehzele* Laimbwe et les rituels de l'eau dans la région du Nord-Ouest du Cameroun), dont il décrit les rites et les rituels qui centralisent le rôle des femmes des Laimbwe. Kah explore ces rituels, qui visent la fécondité et la guérison, ainsi que la protection de la communauté, à partir de deux significations différentes du terme Matriculture - celle de Irene Friesen Wolfstone et celle de Marie-Françoise Guédon. Il conclut que, malgré les défis posés par les activités des

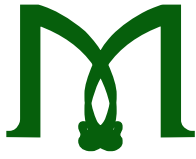
missions chrétiennes dans la région, *Ehzele* Laimbwe peuvent à la fois honorer leurs traditions ancestrales et créer une synthèse dynamique de ces traditions conjuguées aux exigences de la société contemporaine.

Nous sommes heureux que ce numéro thématique de *Matrix* puisse inclure trois contributions créatives : une peinture à l'eau représentant un bassin versant, une photographie et une œuvre d'art textile. L'œuvre *Odenabe (the river that beats like a heart) Watershed* (Bassin versant d'Odenabe, la rivière qui bat comme un cœur) de Jessica Marion Barr révise et re-cartographie le bassin versant autour de Nogojiwanong (« l'endroit au pied des rapides » en Nishinaabemowin, alias Peterborough, en Ontario) à l'aide de peinture créée à partir de plantes aquatiques récoltées dans une rivière voisine. Si la couleur évoque du sang menstruel séché, c'est peut-être une pure coïncidence, mais l'œuvre évoque aussi la beauté du Bouclier canadien.

La photographie « Fragile Items » de Greta Ciūnytė représente l'eau comme un moyen d'entretenir des relations, tant avec elle-même et ses propres sentiments qu'avec, plus complexe, son père. Évoquant des souvenirs à la fois joyeux et effrayants de lui, les éléments de la photo évoquent la bienveillance et une ouverture à la connexion. Avec « La mère de l'eau finlandaise Veen Emo », Kaarina Kailo transcende à la fois la géographie et l'expérience personnelle pour évoquer la Déesse Mère du Monde Aquatique, Créatrice du monde, ainsi qu'Ilmatar, Fille de l'Air. L'art textile de Kailo évoque un monde texturé et stratifié, ancré dans un environnement aquatique.

La dernière partie du numéro présente trois critiques de livres : Carla Ionescu critique *The Woman Who Married the Bear: The Spirituality of the Ancient Foremothers* (La femme qui épousa l'ours : la spiritualité des aïeules)(2023) de Barbara Alice Mann et Kaarina Kailo ; Adriana Kortlandt critique *Les Sociétés Matriarcales – Recherches sur les cultures autochtones à travers le monde* (2019) de Heide Göttner-Abendroth ; et Umasom Amos propose une critique de *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa* (Une réprimande intime : le pouvoir génital féminin dans le rituel et la politique en Afrique de l'Ouest) de Laura S. Grillo (2018).

La dernière contribution est une nécrologie préparée par Lisa Crandall et Donna McIlveen pour la révérende Dr Cheryl Gaver, collègue et amie des éditeurs de *Matrix*. Nous sommes une fois de plus impressionnés par les compétences variées, la générosité et la gentillesse qui caractérisaient le travail de Cheryl ; fiers d'avoir été ses collègues, nous offrons cette nécrologie comme un dernier hommage à son travail et à sa vie.



Yanawana Pedagogies: Learning with Coahuiltecan Water Teachings

MARISSA AKI'NENE MUÑOZ, PABLO MONTES, AND MARLEEN VILLANUEVA

Abstract

In honor of the place where we were visiting, Marleen woke early in the morning to collect Water from the nearby Great Lake, and we lovingly created a makeshift altar of fresh flowers and rebozos. We opened the circle with a public song about sacred Water, then moved on to introductions: "Please share your name, pronouns, and which Waters hold you as your home."

Some folks chose lakes, oceans, rivers, some shared a name in English, some named their home Waters by their ancestral languages. As a collective, we took in a deep breath, and dropped down into our bodies, and into relational ways of knowing and being in community. We were ready to begin.

As Indigenous educators, we are responsible and response-able (Kuokkanen, 2007) to our home communities, to our human and more-than-human kin (Nxumalo & Villanueva, 2020) and to each other to follow cultural protocols that prepare us for our work. In this paper, we reflect on our learning journeys, discussing our roles as Water protectors, mothers, community organizers, and scholars, and offer three examples of ongoing Water work.

Keywords: Indigenous pedagogy, Yanawana, Coahuiltecan, Native American, matriculture



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Resumen

En honor al lugar que estábamos visitando, Marleen se despertó temprano en la mañana para recoger Agua del Gran Lago Michigan que estaba cercano, y con amor creamos un altar improvisado con flores frescas y rebozos. Abrimos el círculo con una canción pública sobre el/la Agua sagrada y luego empezamos las introducciones: "Por favor, comparte tu nombre, pronombres y cuales Aguas te sostienen como tu hogar."

Algunas personas eligieron lagos, océanos, ríos; algunas/os compartieron un nombre en inglés, otras nombraron sus Aguas de origen en sus lenguas ancestrales. Como colectivo, tomamos una respiración profunda, nos sumergimos en nuestros cuerpos y en formas relacionales de conocer y de estar en comunidad. Estábamos listas/os para comenzar.

Como educadores indígenas, somos responsables y tenemos la capacidad de responder (Kuokkanen, 2007) ante nuestras comunidades de origen, ante nuestros parientes humanos y más-que-humanos (Nxumalo & Villanueva, 2020), y ante los demás, siguiendo los protocolos culturales que nos han preparado para nuestro trabajo. En este artículo, reflexionamos sobre nuestros caminos de aprendizaje, discutiendo nuestros roles como protectores del Agua, madres, organizadores comunitarios y académicos, y ofrecemos tres ejemplos de trabajo continuo con el/la Agua.

Palabras clave: Pedagogía indígena, Yanawana, Coahuilteca, nativos americanos, matricultura

Résumé

En l'honneur de l'endroit que nous visitons, Marleen s'est réveillé tôt le matin pour récupérer de l'eau du Grand Lac voisin, et nous avons créé avec amour un autel de fortune composé de fleurs fraîches et de rebozos. Nous avons ouvert le cercle avec une chanson publique sur l'Eau sacrée, puis sommes passés aux introductions : "S'il vous plaît, partagez votre nom, vos pronoms et quelles Eaux quelles eaux vous semblent être votre foyer. »

Certaines personnes ont choisi des lacs, des océans, des rivières, d'autres ont partagé un nom en anglais, d'autres ont nommé leurs Eaux d'origine d'après leurs langues ancestrales. En tant que collectif, nous avons pris une profonde inspiration et nous sommes plongés dans nos corps et dans des manières

relationnelles de connaître et d'être en communauté. Nous étions prêts à commencer.

En tant qu'éducateurs autochtones, nous sommes responsables et capables de répondre (Kuokkanen, 2007) envers nos communautés d'origine, envers nos parents humains et plus qu'humains (Nxumalo & Villanueva, 2020) et les uns envers les autres pour suivre les protocoles culturels qui nous préparent à notre travail. Dans cet article, nous réfléchissons à nos parcours d'apprentissage, discutons de nos rôles en tant que protectrices de l'eau, mères, organisatrices communautaires et universitaires, et proposons trois exemples de travaux en cours axés sur l'Eau.

Mots-clés : Pédagogie autochtone, Yanawana, Coahuiltecan, Amérindiens, matriculture

Introduction

Charlie picked me up at about 5am. We had both not slept much the night before but Charlie showed up at 5am and so we drove to Lake Michigami.

I had asked Charlie if they would take me to the Waters so that we could leave offerings, merge our home-Waters, Yanawana, with the Lake Waters in gratitude for allowing us to enjoy a few days on the traditional unceded homeLands of the Council of the Three Fires: the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi Nations. Many other tribes, such as the Miami, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, and Sac and Fox, also called this area home. We knew we'd have to ask the Lake Waters if we could gather some Water to ensure that they would be present during our presentation happening later that day.

We parked, people were already jogging, cops were already lurking. We brought out our sacred items and approached the Water. Offerings were made, people stared, we sang songs, Waters merged, and permission was granted to collect the Lake Waters.

As we were closing out, Charlie said: "I didn't know how much I needed the lake, thank you for bringing me back." I hugged Charlie, our friend, community member, local host, and knowledge keeper by the Water, feeling nourished and fulfilled as we looked out onto the Waters in gratitude. This was a coming home, a welcome back, a matriarchal reciprocity.

In this paper, we situate Matriculture as encompassing and engendering the multiple articulations of femininity, patriarchy, gender, and sexual variance. We do so because instead of thinking about 'woman' as a stable category, we draw on Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous knowledge and feminisms to disrupt the presumed archaic stability of 'woman.' In other words, we approach Matriculture as already and always incorporating gender expansivity and as a response to the toxicity of cisheteropatriarchy that perpetually reinforces rigid gender binaries due to the continuous violence of settler colonialism (Spillett 2021, Moregenson, 2011).

Water knows no gender, yet encompasses all that gender has, can, and will be. In many communities, women tend to the Waters and many traditions flow through these sacred relations between the matriarchs and Water epistemologies. It is within this understanding that we position the ancestral and traditional Matricultural Water knowledge as flowing beyond colonial renderings of 'women' toward (re)storying Indigenous gender and sexual expansivity. As Two-Spirit Cree scholar Alex Wilson (2008) shares, Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous people do not necessarily 'come out,' they 'come-in' to their ancestral roles, community responsibilities, and kinship circles.

Relational Introductions

We are friends, relatives, and scholars, community members who practice our ancestral ways of knowing in, with, and, of Yanawana, a sacred Watershed. Collectively, we are the dreams of our Chichimeca, Tlaxcalteca, Pame, Wixairika, Guamares, Esto'k Gna, Coahuilteca, and P'urépecha ancestors. We belong to Ofelia, Tona, Oscar, Oscar, Norma, Maria, Manuel, Genoveva, Jose, Jose, Margarita, Maria Luisa, Eustacio, Maria Nieves, Angel, Angel, Meshika, Ventura, Chenchó, Leonor, Ursula, and Mario. Everything is possible because of, with, and for them.

From our loved ones, we've learned to carry and protect sacred Water, tend medicinal plant relatives, make ancestral foods, to create art, to dance our prayers, birthwork, defend sacred Land, sing medicine songs, and drum as lifeways. We uplift and support our communit(ies) as community organizers, educators, danzantes, thinkers, writers, scientists, scholars, and youth advocates. Home is Yanawana, Somi Se'k, Huatzindeo, Houston, La Huasteca, and wherever we find ourselves in relation/in ceremony. Our ancestral Waters connect us to el Rio Lerma, el Rio Bravo/Grande, Yanawana, el Golfo de Mexico, los manantiales, to each other, to our ancestors, and grandchildren yet to come.

Our collective writing is a reflection, working to theorize our practices (Stepney & Thompson, 2019) as whole human selves, inclusive of the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual ways we contribute to knowledge exchange. Trusting our ancestral

knowledges and intuition, we can speak in different epistemologies to the many layers of meaning necessary to carry Waters.

Originally, we came together to talk about teaching and Yanawana at a big formal educational conference. Instead of thinking our ways through a Powerpoint presentation, devoid of life, devoid of Water, we chose to honor each other as whole beings, and practice our Water teachings in a community of learners.

Creating a Yanawana Sacred Space

While it is true that our gathering together is a sacred practice, the dual reality remains. In places that are inherently and structurally violent, especially in colonial institutions that have long sought to extinguish Indigenous knowledges, our gathering could be understood as an act of disruption, transgression, and defiance against the expected norms of the conference. Context and positionality matter, and for each of us, as three emerging scholars, breaking from professional norms was/is fraught. Even though our intention was to create a safe space in which to share sacred Water pedagogies, nurtured by relational ways of knowing and being, our existence within multiple forms of institutionality created tension for us.

Guided by intuition and ancestral knowledges, and inspired by de/colonial pedagogies of creation resistance (Cintli, 2021) which honor Indigenous ways of knowing and being that exist beyond Western frames of understanding, we created a Yanawana Sacred Space within the large convention center meeting space. In our shared practice of changing the meaning of space through mutual nurturance, our Yanawana Sacred Space became a manifestation of the collective desires and otherwise dreams of our multiple communities.

We were taught to invite our community to co-create a circular sacred space, to make one large circle and intentionally see each other, to listen with our whole selves, and to make space for the ancestral knowledge that resonates in each one of us. Our work models organic and holistic approaches to co-learning, co-creating, and revitalizing Indigenous knowledges. We made our shared space conducive to collective thinking and conviviality. At the center of our circle, we built an altar, using the personal sacred items we each use: our rebozos with beautiful embroidery, fresh local flowers, and Water that was collected from Lake Michigan in prayer at sunrise that morning. Our altar honored Water as Life itself, connecting all beings past, present, and future, as a proleptic ancestor and teacher.

Although our ancestral Waters have carried each of us from a multiplicity of places (San Luis Potosi, Laredo/San Antonio, and Guanajuato), we are connected by our sacred relation to Yanawana, which in the Coahuiltecan language means 'spirit of the Water';

Water of the spirit.’ It is the ancestral name for one of the sacred springs of Central Texas, and the place name of the communities that rely on the Watershed. Yanawana and ancestral water pedagogies (Nxumalo & Villanueva, 2020; Muñoz, 2019; Montes, 2023) teach us that wherever we journey, wherever the Waters instruct us to go, we must hold Water in the honorable ways that we were taught: Water is agentic, alive, sentient, and life giving. Just as Water in Nature fills the available space and pushes the Land to accommodate its many forms, so too do Yanawana pedagogies need space to exist, thrive, and flow in co-constitutive and restorative ways.

Opening Circle in Good Relations

Yanawana yo yana
Yana Yanawana yo yana
Oh yana, Yanawana yo yana
Eya na ei nei yo way
Abuelito, Abuelita escucha mis palabras de cariño y amor
Oh yana, yanawana yo yana
Yanawana Eya na ei nei yo way

We opened our community circle through song and prayer, invoking Yanawana by their ancestral name through the Abuelito/Abuelita Water song that we sing in our community. The song speaks to the reverence of Water, and loving relationship to the ancient ones, the Grandmas/Grandpas/Grandparents; it asked permission to pray with the Waters connecting the local Lake Michigan with each of our home Waters, and centered the ancient wisdom of our antepasados.

As a good relation, we each introduced ourselves, and asked those in the circle to share their

- name
- pronouns, and to consider sharing
- Where feels like home?
- What Waters hold you?

The question ‘Where are you from?’ is always instilled with colonial fragments, especially when considering those in diaspora, refugees, and those with undocumented status for whom the answers can be difficult or dangerous. We therefore decided to re-shape the question to allow people to enter the conversation in whatever way felt right.

The last question ‘What Waters hold you?’ created an unexpected pause. “No one has ever asked me to name my home Waters,” was the repeated preface to a wide variety of

answers. Some folks chose lakes, oceans, rivers, some shared a name in English, some named their home Waters by their own ancestral languages. As a collective, we took in a deep breath, and dropped down into our bodies, into relational ways of knowing and being, and connected as a community of learners. We were ready to begin.

What Waters hold you?

Our Water Stories contain teachings

Yanawana yo yana
Yana Yanawana yo yana
Oh yana, Yanawana yo yana
Eya na ei nei yo way

Some of the Land-based knowledge we learn is specific to particular places in our local ecologies, to the particular network of mutual nurturance in the rich community of species specific to those places. Many locals know the local plant and animal relatives, and cultivate spiritual ways-of-knowing specific to the places they consider home. When I interviewed my father about the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo, our ancestral Waters, he shared the following story from his childhood,

Tia Josefa in particular, Tia Josefa was my curandera. She knew to curar de susto, and how to deliver babies. She had all kind of herbs in either alcohol or vodka. I knew if it was in a vodka bottle it was stuff that we were going to be drinking. If it was in an alcohol bottle, I had to bring the alcohol, go buy her the alcohol sometimes it was a whole nickel for alcohol. It wasn't for drinking, it was going to be something that you would rub on.

She would hand me a plant and she'd say, "Alright. See this plant?" Then she gave me a paper bag, and she'd say "Fill this bag with this kind of plant." Or she'd give me two plants and she'd say "Give me a bag of this and a bag of this."

And I remember I asked "What are you going to use it for?" She goes "son para mis remedios." Every once in a while she would tell me what the remedio was, and what it is going to be for. I wish I had remembered and I had asked more questions now.

In her kitchen there was a cupboard that she had with all the remedios. Some of these plants that I would get her would be in like mason jars. No labels,

she'd just do it. The plants that she would put in mason jars was for making teas, the plants that she would put in vodka...was for drinking, and whatever went into alcohol was going to be for rubbing. So, she had a bunch of them, a bunch of them. Like I said, I never knew [the names of] what I was gathering, I just knew that I was helping her get some of her medicinal remedies. (Oski, 2015, cited in Muñoz, 2018)

My dad's story reminds us that the Land, river, and people are not separate entities, but instead, are an interconnected community of living beings specific to each curve of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo. He has taken me to the places he remembers, though the landscape has changed in the last 60 years. I learned about the river from his stories, and by walking the Land, using all my senses, to be present with both human and more-than-human relations. While I can only guess at which plants may have been abundant at the riverside so many years ago, the deep relationships and collective ways of knowing continue as part of daily life with the Rio.

In Spanish, el Rio is gendered as male, while el agua is feminine, but uses masculine grammar. When I write in English of the Rio Grande as my ancestral river, she is often feminine, yet, I default to often call them by both names, Rio Grande/Rio Bravo, to honor Water as alive and sentient and knowing of all aspects of Creation.

For me, the Rio Grande is home, as she has witnessed many generations of my family live along their banks. When I go home, I sing honor songs to them, offer beautiful gifts of flowers or other sacred medicines, and am filled with gratitude for their generosity and nurturance. These are the same practices and responsibilities I carry with me wherever I live. Home is now in Yanawana, a few hours north. Just as Water moves across the Landscape, I imagine my voice to carry the honor songs across the Landscape, connecting me home.

Where feels like home?
What Waters hold you?

I share a dream that was gifted to me after a Water ceremony a group of us did in Austin, TX. As Yanawana pedagogies ask, we brought flowers, our sacred medicine, instruments, and our songs to one of the Sacred Springs of the Coahuiltecan people - tza wan pupako (colonially known as Barton Springs in Austin). We gifted flowers, songs, and medicine to the Water as the sun descended behind us. That night, my Grandma, Mama Gino, visited me. I share the dream, which has been written elsewhere, on how our relation with Water, gifted me this dream with my now ancestor:

One day I was missing my grandma, Mama Gino, who is now an ancestor. It had been a couple years since her earthly departure, and for some reason, I was worried that one day I would forget what her voice sounded like. I thought about her all day and kept replaying her voice in my head to give myself the comfort of knowing that her voice is still etched into my memory. I remember chuckling at how she would always call me *mija* (daughter), which is a word of endearment, whenever she would talk to me. Although this may seem mundane, this simple act somehow made me feel validated as a Queer person even though she may have never known. That night, I dreamt of picking blue dawns. In my dream, I felt that I was drifting away from Mama Gino, and I asked her to guide me in remembering and to give me a sign that she was still here. Blurry with tears, I looked down and I saw blue dawns emerging from the green earth beneath my feet. In the most soothing way, I heard Mama Gino say “ve a agarrarlas” (go grab them). I picked the flowers as she instructed me and as I held them near, I heard her say “si vez, nunca voy a estar lejos de ti porque yo estoy en todas las flores que te rodean. Cuando me extrañes, escoje una flor y habla con ella, y yo estare ahi para escucharte” (you see, I will never be far away from you because I am in all the flowers that surround you. When you miss me, choose a flower, and talk to it, and I will be there to listen to you). That year, I planted blue dawns in my backyard as a way to thank my now ancestor for what she taught me that night. Mama Gino spoke life into the lesson that ancestors will always be present, regardless of how much time has passed. She reminded me that picking blue dawns was an act of honoring ancestor epistemologies (Montes, 2022: 1-2).

Although my Grandma never knew of my gender and sexual identity, I felt that her ways of knowing always already encompassed my Queer subjectivity. Water has no gender, no sexuality, yet engenders all that has been and could possibly be. Water has reminded me that existing as a Queer person, whose gender flows like Water knowledge, is both a gift and a lesson. Mama Gino calling me daughter, and not correcting it, was an act of engendering Queer possibilities, because she saw no difference in calling me *mija* or *mijo*; *she recognized me just being*. What, then, could ancestor epistemologies teach us about honoring Water, honoring the Queer self, and the ways of being that are interlocked and flowing with each other? Yanawana pedagogies have taught me that existing beyond the colonality of the gender binary, is really an act of (re)remembering and (re)Storying. Even more so, the Water story I have shared repairs and restores my ancestor relations amidst the remnants of cisheteropatriarchy and settler sexualities that continue to wash over my family. I exist because of the cumulative nature of Water and therefore, all the rivers and tributaries that run their course through my veins, engender all the possibilities of what the Queer self can ever be; that is the lesson that Mama Gino has given me.

Abuelito, Abuelita escucha mis palabras de cariño y amor
Oh yana, yanawana yo yana

In 2016, I received an invitation to a Water pilgrimage where Coahuiltecan community members led a group of us to collect Water at four sacred springs. It is here that an elder of the community reminded us that being there, hearing the call, and accepting the responsibility to the Water was much bigger than a one-time event. This elder told us that by being there at the Water, we had chosen to carry the responsibility to protect the Water for the rest of our lives. I remember how we blew the tobacco smoke into the Water. This was the first time that what elders had been saying for so long became material reality. I had been told that Water speaks to us. That we are all capable of hearing what the Water says, interpreting the language of the Water. For years, I thought I knew what that meant. I approached the Water with respect and care and love. However, until this moment I had not experienced such an intimate moment with the Water. This time, as the smoke blew into the Water, I began to ask the Water what I could do to reciprocate the love that I felt from the Water. The smoke blended into the Water as these prayers/thoughts came forth and I began to hear the Water's response. This response wasn't audio as I may have imagined that it should be. The response was seeing how the swirls of smoke in the Water became shining stars. The Water was finding a way to communicate with me that I was finally able to understand. In that moment, I realized that the Water was asking me if I was open to carrying the responsibility to protect all Waters. I saw the stars as the question and I found myself bowing to the Water in reverence. I accepted the responsibility. I told the Water that I would go anywhere that Yanawana wanted me to go. That I would work hard to always listen to what the Water asked of me. A pact of protection was created. The stars shone in gratitude and my tears flowed down my cheeks in reciprocating gratitude.

Learning from our Water Stories

Kinship and kin-making

But what does it mean to be *good* relatives—to not only recognize our kinship but to be *good* kin? Because, for Indigenous peoples, kinship is not simply a matter of being like a brother or sister to somebody. It carries specific responsibilities depending on the kind of relationship we agree upon (Krawec, 2022: 18-19).

As Krawec (2022) illustrates, kinship and kin-making is an act of responsibility. One is not simply 'related' to someone else but being *in* relation and forming kinships is embedded with a far more ontological importance. *Who* are we in relation? *What* shapes our

kinship? Kim Tallbear (2019) invites us to imagine otherwise relations and to move beyond the perpetual centering of normative kinship ties, such as non-monogamous legal marriage and nuclear biological family, toward other kinds of intimacies that exist beyond the settler notions of relationships. The Water stories we have shared shape our relations with ancestors, Land and Waters, and each other and usher in a possibility of radical intimacies. Through and with Water we learn that being guided toward other Water kin is an ancestral practice, that communal interconnectivity is far more powerful than borderizations, and that Queerness is a sacred subjectivity. Our authored stories ebb and flow between and with each other and (e)merging as an interconnected tapestry instead of isolated experiences with Yanawana. These stories shared *are our relationships* (Wilson, 2008) and hold our theories (Brayboy, 2005) and it is within this understanding that Water is both kin and an epistemological space by which kinships are made. We honor our Water stories and place them in the larger ripple of Water knowledges that began before us and that now extend further because of us.

Water is life, Water holds memory, Water has agency, Water is an ancestor and everyone and everything is connected through Water. These Water teachings allow for a shift in perspective towards accountability to Water, or Water view: the ways in which we are accountable for how Water views us (Yazzie & Baldy, 2018). Specifically, Yanawana teachings, therefore, ask us to sit with the myriad of possibilities for how the sacred Waters of Yanawana view us as kin and what the process of consent in this kinship may look like. What kind of relative are we to our ancestral Waters?

Nick Estes (2019), Kul Wicasa, a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe and of the Oceti Sakowin Oyate, explains that to the Oceti Sakowin, enacting kinship is equivalent to *woyakuye* (being a good relative). *Woyakuye* involves honoring relations and including more-than-human beings in these relations. To the Oceti Sakowin, the Missouri River, or Mni Sose is a relative. Being a good relative to Mni Sose means standing up for and protecting Water, Land, animals, and humans from the “trespass of settlers, pipelines, and dams” (Estes, 2019: 21). We can understand the concept as contextual, full of tension, and specific to the places considered home to their community.

In a similar vein, Secwépemc scholar Melpatkwa Matthew (2020) engages with the concept of *k'wseltnéws*, which refers to Secwépemc kinship, although the English language falls short in translating the complexity and embodiment of *k'wseltnéws*. Embedded in the language are the theoretical and methodological frameworks that bring forth relationality and Secwépemc life ways, to reveal how Secwépemc peoples relate to Water, learn from Water, and are responsible to Water. *K'wseltnéws* as Secwépemc grounded normativity allows for Matthew to center the lived experiences and relations with Land/place/Water in order to open “opportunities to imagine Secwépemc knowledge outside of settler-colonial ideologies and capitalist modes of production” (2020: 3).

Secwépemc ways of knowing and being (as kin) exist independently of colonial ideas. For those of us for whom our ancestral languages are not our default frames for understanding may mourn our lack of fluency, however, notions of kin-making, Land and Water knowledges, and ancestral practices from our own families and communities offer guidance.

Queer(ing) Land and Water relations

Alex Wilson (2021) shares

queering Land-based education also demands our focus on what might best be described as ‘reconstructive practices,’ that is, the radical reclamation and reassertion of Indigenous peoples’ queer cosmologies, of our relationships with the Land and the beings and forces who share that Land with us, and of the knowledge and practices that have nourished and animated these relationships and enabled and supported our survival, sustainability and wellbeing (224).

Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous feminisms encourage us to remember that gender and sexual expansivity has always already existed, and that colonialism and settler sexualities were failed attempts to eradicate Two-Spirit subjectivities (Wilson, 1996; Driskill, 2004; Simpson, 2017; Scott & Kinanâskomitinâwâw, 2024; Morengson, 2011). Water is genderful (rather than gender-less), and is all-engendering. As long as Water brings us together, they guide our mobilities across and through space, time, and geographies, we (re)charge the spaces that are marked with colonial violences (Montes, forthcoming). Yanawana teaches us that we carry ancestral epistemologies wherever we go. Just like the process that feeds the sacred springs and from which Yanawana emerges, Water enacts a curricular mobility, always instilling the importance of flowing, tracing back, and shaping forward (Montes, forthcoming). As we explore Water teachings that are proleptic, cyclical, and genderful, revitalizing ancestral kinships, we are reminded by the contrast of how colonization interrupted the many inclusive two-spirited Indigenous ways of knowing and being in relation to our Lands and Waters.

Water-based education informs our return to Matriculture as an act of restoring, restorying, and storying our collective and relational well-being, reconceptualizing how we attend to struggles for Water justice as parallels to gender and queer justice. In this respect, queering our Land and Water relations actively reframes the man vs. nature trope as colonial, gendered violence against a passive and inanimate natural world.

Indigenous Water justice recognises that Water is a living entity. In doing so, Water justice moves beyond conceptualisations solely focused on fairness,

equity and participation of humans in Water decisionmaking, to also include relationality. It asks – "What does the Water need?" (Leonard *et al.*, 2023: 396).

Indeed, to do so, we must also examine what tools we have to answer such questions:

What Waters hold you?
What do those Waters need?

Relational Ecologies

From this intergenerational and ontological perspective, kinship also requires us to reconceptualize notions of ecology, as well as our roles and responsibilities to the places and spaces we live. *Being-in-relation* (Muñoz, 2018) is a play on the phrase *human being*, which is considered a noun referring to humans. However, when inclusive of humans and non-human beings, defined relationally, the phrase gently reminds us that we humans are one tiny aspect of a dynamic universe, neither superior to nor apart from the natural world, but simply as a being in relation to other beings. Shifting the definition from a noun to the verb form of *being*, and to the specific ties and relationships of always *being-in-relation* to other beings, we recognize our being-ness requires attention. For example, when we prepare to begin ceremony or engage with ancestral knowledges, we intentionally focus our attention to be grounded and present as beings-in-relation, in community. When we welcome our Land and Water relatives, we call them by their ancestral names, or offer a song to honor their presence as beings-in-relation.

Building on this idea, as an engaged community of beings-in-relation, we can then understand how knowledge arises from beings in relation to the Land and Waters (Armstrong, 1998), in a dynamic system of relational ecologies. The flora and fauna, temperament of the rivers, seasonality of movement and energy cycles have meaning whether humans are present or not. When we allow ourselves to be present and attuned to our relational ecologies, the collective memory and ancestral knowledges arise as teachings that we might otherwise be too distracted to notice.

Collective Memory and Living Archives

Many cultures honor their elders as living archives, because they remember the stories, histories, and collective changes over their lifetimes. We extend this recognition to also understand our Waters and Lands as elder relatives, as living archives who also remember. In our own communal understandings of Water, Water simultaneously holds and *is* memory. Water holds the memories of our epistemologies, our communal responsibilities, and our ceremonial protocols. In many ways, Water is a living archive always already

woven through and by our collective memories. *Collective memory* seeks to understand how a community subjectively constructs meaning from historical events, which often include interpretations, emotions, reflections of identity, and political positions (Hom & Yamamoto, 2000). Collective memory works to narrate historical events with multiple voices from an embodied and emplaced perspective (Riaño-Alcalá & Baines, 2011), and is automatically positioned as a form of resistance against imposed dominant narratives of history (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Calderon, 2014) which normalize colonization, and therefore, can be understood as intellectual colonialism (Castillo & Tabuenca-Córdoba, 2002; Gaudry, 2011; Rodríguez, 2014). For Native and Indigenous communities, interventions such as decolonizing (Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012), Indigenizing (Smith, 1999; Simpson, 2014), as well as the articulation of queer subjectivities (Wilson, 1996; Driskill, 2004; Simpson, 2017) and insurgent (Gaudry, 2011) and oppositional consciousness(es) (Sandoval, 2000), and creation resistance (Cintli, 2021) interrupt colonial structures to revitalize the Indigenous world (Smith, 1999), free from the expectation of reacting to colonial forces, values, or narratives. Ceremony lives in our collective cultural memory, as a cultural practice passed down through the generations, offering an alternative epistemological orientation to what it means to be, how we move through time, and how to be good relatives.

Response-ability

Kuokkanen writes the "self and the world are not separate entities" (2007: 41), but are connected by a "response-ability – that is, an ability to respond, to remain attuned to the world beyond oneself" (39). Beings within a relational ecology are connected by their response-ability, inclusive of animate and less animate beings. For example, while we can easily consider the potential response-abilities when we observe mobile beings, such as humans or squirrels (as an example of a more-than-human being), and less mobile living beings, such as deciduous trees, we might also consider also the response-abilities of Land, and, by extension, Water. While for some, Land is inclusive of and foundational of all Creation, inclusive of Water, we intentionally honor Water, in their many forms, as a being-in-relation, response-able and responsive to Land, to Sky, to other beings-in-relation. Our understanding of Water is not subsumed into, nor is it entirely dependent on Land. Water's abilities to respond are different than Land, depending on each context of relational ecology. Perhaps it is the slight difference in each's abilities to respond that differentiates Land from Water.

When Cruikshank (2005) asked "Do glaciers listen?" she invited readers to examine how ancestral knowledge is embedded in Native languages, and shared by those in the local community who benefit from the collective memory and understandings of the human glacier relations that is crucial for survival where they live. Colonization does not recognize

the meanings that come from fluency with the glaciers, from deeply knowing how humans and glaciers are connected. Strang elaborates,

Water's diversity is, in some respects, a key to its meanings. Here is an object that is endlessly transmutable, moving readily from one shape to another: from ice to steam, from vapour to rain, from fluid to steam...The process of transformation never ceases: Water is always undergoing change, movement and progress (Strang, 2005: 98-99).

We push Strang's connections between form and meaning further, positing that Water as ancestor and living archive of collective memory, is endlessly response-able to, for, and with life. Water that connects us to each other, to the generations before and after us, *is life itself*. What are our response-abilities and responsibilities to our Waters as a cycle of mutual reciprocity as kin? The notions of relational ecologies and response-abilities encourages us to zoom out and consider the other-than-human beings who share our Lands and the Waters. To do so decenters our default (colonial) frames of human exceptionalism to recognize our response-abilities to all of life itself.

Future Facing Education

Interestingly, as educators, when we have such conversations with adults, feedback often includes feeling like our work is a gentle reminder of teachings they once knew. Stories invite stories, activating ancestral knowledges that - no matter how distant - resonate differently than formal institutional teachings. It feels familiar.

However, when working with young people, who have not had the experiences of extended time in formal (colonial) education, or preconceived notions of nature, Land and Water teachings are intuitive and easily learned, offering gentle lessons of how to experience the natural world around us. As such, Indigenous youth (and we argue other historically and systematically marginalized youth) have to unlearn the colonial notions that portray a false separation between themselves and the rest of creation. For example, Fast *et al.*, (2021) shares how through a Land-based retreat for Indigenous youth, youth recognized the impact of colonialism in their communities, but more importantly, they were able to reconnect and create a wider web of knowledge and resistance to the colonial paradigm, creating deeper relations within the Indigenous community, speaking more openly with new knowledge, and becoming more of who they have always been (131).

Similarly, Water teachings remind us of our responsibilities as beings-of-Water; for who are we but the streams, springs, waves, and currents that shape our geographies, emplace

our kinships, and embody our subjectivities. We conclude our paper by suggesting we *weave an otherwise education* (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2023) that honors and centers Water knowledge. In many ways, a Water-based education “[deepens] an otherwise that honors being in relations with each other, the land, and expansive waterways, and more-than-human beings.”(2) In doing so, we envision a future facing path for education that builds on ancestral knowledges towards a cyclical, proleptic, genderful, relational reciprocity with Lands, Waters, and Life itself.

In this article, our Water stories traveled downstream, serpentine through valleys, and emptied in the gulf as tiny tributaries in the river of cultural collective memory in this place of Waters called Yanawana. True to our responsibilities and response-abilities as educators, we offer the following activity to remind us to more fully be beings-of-Water, moving toward a collective and relational future.

Water is kin Imprinting Water Activity

We returned from our Water teaching meanderings to bring our awareness back to our Yanawana Sacred Space, our circle, and asked that those who chose to participate please fill their cups or Water bottles with fresh drinking Water. We shared the work of Dr. Masaru Emoto (2005, 2011) who first suggested Water consciousness, demonstrating how Water is responsive to human words and intentions, and how Water holds memory. We shared the photographs of his Water work, of his process of imprinting emotions into Water and freezing, to produce beautiful frozen Water crystals when Water is regarded with positive intentions and words, and compared the distortions in the Water forms when negative words or thoughts were imprinted into the Water.

While today’s technology is helpful in producing photographs of Water crystals, our ancestors have always known the power of imprinting emotions and sentiments in Water. This explains why many Native and Indigenous traditions speak of bringing offerings to the Waters: flowers, sacred medicines, songs, and prayers. These ceremonial traditions imprint Water with good energy, thoughts, and intentions, fortifying our home Waters for the benefit and well-being of all Creation and of all our relations. We shared our practices of imprinting Water as a practice of being-in-relation.

To practice this ancestral knowledge, we gently reminded each other that we are responsible for what we imprint in all Waters, including our internal Waters. We kindly asked participants to consider adding a closing thought, word, or intention reflective of how they felt to close out our learning time, and modeled how to speak good things into our Water(s), which we drank, to bring the Water teachings full of love and respect into our internal Waters. In doing so, we recognized ourselves as bodies of Water, beings-of-

Water, worthy of beautiful offerings. Drinking from our Waters also reminded us that we have the capacity not only to imprint our internal Waters, but also about the impact and imprint that our words can have on all bodies and beings of Water. What we give to the Water, we give to ourselves.

Yanawana yo yana
Yana Yanawana yo yana
Oh yana, Yanawana yo yana
Eya na ei nei yo way
Abuelito, Abuelita escucha mis palabras de cariño y amor
Oh yana, yanawana yo yana
Yanawana Eya na ei nei yo way.

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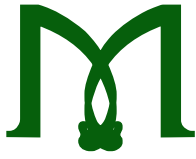
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Metamorphosing with Selkies: Shape-Shifting Instabilities in the Self-Conscious Anthropocene

SARAH E. MCFARLAND

Abstract

This article redeploys Irish seal folk stories, a tradition of social and ecological knowledge germane to the era of climate change, as potent cultural messages that challenge contemporary ideologies about ecosystems and human beings. The selkie wife story exposes the consequences of exceptionalist hierarchies, including those that structure nature as subordinate, animals as subordinate, and women as subordinate, confirming what Val Plumwood has argued about such constructions: “Racism, colonialism, and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial, and ethnic difference as closer to the animal.”¹ Challenging this discriminatory thinking, the seal folk model accomplishes at least four things that are vital to its function as a traditional Irish folktale and to the ethical considerations it produces in the self-conscious Anthropocene. At its foundation lies a flexible worldview that accepts species ambiguity, contrasting with representations of biological others that fix their bodies as landscapes of control and abuse; the story itself is a warning against arrogance and domination, and is a rebuke of imperialism; and finally, it develops a clear lesson about how to be a proper person.

¹ Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993: 4.



Here I radically renegotiate human exceptionalism and the ontologies that illusion supports by turning to selkie myths and other stories of shapeshifting women to imagine alternative ways of thinking and living in the self-conscious Anthropocene² in productive and collaborative ways.

Keywords: selkies, Irish folklore, human exceptionalism, matriculture

Résumé

Cet article redéploie les histoires folkloriques irlandaises sur les phoques, une tradition de connaissances sociales et écologiques pertinentes à l'ère du changement climatique, en tant que messages culturels puissants qui remettent en question les idéologies contemporaines sur les écosystèmes et les êtres humains. L'histoire de la femme Selkie expose les conséquences des hiérarchies exceptionnalistes, y compris celles qui structurent la nature comme subordonnée, les animaux comme subordonnés et les femmes comme subordonnées, confirmant ce que Val Plumwood a soutenu à propos de telles constructions : « Le racisme, le colonialisme, et le sexisme ont retiré leur force conceptuelle du fait de présenter les différences sexuelles, raciales et ethniques comme [une situation] plus proche de l'animal. »³ Remettant en question cette pensée discriminatoire, le modèle des gens du phoque (selkies) accomplit au moins quatre choses qui sont essentielles à sa fonction de conte populaire irlandais traditionnel et aux considérations éthiques qu'il produit dans un Anthropocène conscient de lui-même. À la base du récit se trouve une vision du monde flexible qui accepte une certaine ambiguïté des espèces, contrastant avec les représentations des « autres » biologiques qui figent leurs corps comme des paysages de contrôle et d'abus ; le conte lui-même est un avertissement contre l'arrogance et la domination, et une réprimande contre l'impérialisme ; et enfin, il développe une leçon claire sur la façon d'être une bonne personne.

Ici, je renégocie radicalement l'exceptionnalisme humain et les ontologies que soutient l'illusion en me tournant vers les mythes selkie et d'autres histoires de femmes métamorphes pour imaginer des façons alternatives de penser et de

² I use this term following Lynn Keller in *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*.

³ Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993: 4.

vivre dans l'Anthropocène conscient de soi,⁴ de manière productive et collaborative.

Mots-clés : selkies, folklore irlandais, exceptionnalisme humain, matriculture

I think the world is dying because we were
dead to its astonishments pretty much. It'll be
around but it will become less and less until
it's finally compatible with our feelings for it.
--- Joy Williams, *Harrow*⁵

In this article, I redeploy the inspirational figure of the selkie toward emphasizing non-hierarchical and sustainable co-existences between various species, ecosystems, and human beings. Its title alludes to lines from the Irish poet Eavan Boland's poem "The Woman," which evokes "The hour of change, of metamorphosis, / of shape-shifting instabilities. / My time of sixth sense and second sight."⁶ I thereby substantiate ways that selkies can encourage similar experiences of wonder and transformation. Seal-human shapeshifters, selkies are non-dualistic and challenge Western binary oppositions in their very beingness, which is difference and continuity, animal and human, natural and cultural all at once. Despite the common misunderstanding that selkies are humans in seal form, they are actually another species altogether. They personify the paradox of species difference by existing in a liminal space between, a 'both/and' figure. I argue for a radical diminishment of human exceptionalism in this turn toward selkies and other watery, shapeshifting women as inspirations toward imagining alternative practices of thinking and living in productive, collaborative ways. This perspective is vitally necessary in light of the destabilizing effects of global climate change, biodiversity loss, and mass extinction in the twenty-first century. Because of their fluid species ambiguity, selkies are uniquely positioned to subvert the assumptions of human exceptionalism that drive exploitations of ecosystems and human and nonhuman others in our current geologic era. They can thus help us reconsider our species' role in the world, when the lives of many humans and our aquatic and terrestrial nonhuman kin are rendered especially precarious.

⁴ J'utilise ce terme à la suite de Lynn Keller dans *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*.

⁵ Joy Williams, *Harrow: A Novel* (Knopf Doubleday, 2022), ix.

⁶ Eavan Boland, *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990* (W. W. Norton, 1990), 84.

As many scholars have noted, even labeling this geological period the Anthropocene is provocative for centering the human as a universalizing species concept, ignoring wider implications, disparate accountabilities, and divergent experiences of environmental changes. In 'The Anthropocene: Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea,' Rob Nixon illustrates the dangers of species narcissism, observing that "it's one thing to recognize that *Homo sapiens* has accrued massive bio- and geomorphic powers. But it's another thing altogether to fixate on human agency to a degree that downplays the imperfectly understood, infinitely elaborate webs of nonhuman agency."⁷ As Susan M. Rustick argues in 'Held Hostage by the Anthropocene,' the designation makes it difficult "to generate an appropriate ethical response grounded in compassion and a recognition of our mutual interdependence with all of life."⁸

As an alternative, Lynn Keller's phrase 'the self-conscious Anthropocene' foregrounds the extensive awareness and recognition of "a powerful cultural phenomenon tied to reflexive, critical, and often anxious awareness of the scale and severity of human effects on the planet."⁹ Keller's analyses of experimental poetics shows how it "encourages readers to think in terms of a vast net of interconnection in which [...] other wild creatures cannot be associated with escape from human strife or human limitation, for those now shape all planetary experience in the Anthropocene."¹⁰ Such interconnectivity aligns with Bruno Latour's suggestion that we should deploy moments of "risky diplomacy"¹¹ to recognize the interpenetrating and co-constitutive interweaving of organisms and environments, rejecting the modern contract that leads to the reification of partitions between absolute nature and an autonomous human culture, between the 'other' and the 'self.' Selkies model a fluid and interchangeable relationship between human and nonhuman boundaries and themselves exist within that interweaving.

Selkies refute the distinctions between humans and other animals, cultures and natures, and human agents encountering nonhuman objects. For example, in one version of the selkie wife story, the tale begins with a lonely young human fisherman who comes across women dancing and laughing on the coastline. The women are mesmerizingly beautiful, and the young man sneaks closer and closer to watch them dance and play. As he gets

⁷ Rob Nixon, 'The Anthropocene: Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea,' *Edge Effects* (6 November 2014, updated 12 October 2019): unpaginated.

⁸ Susan M. Rustick, 'Held Hostage by the Anthropocene,' in *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene*, eds. Morten Tønnessen, Kristin Armstrong Oma, and Silver Rattasepp (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 4.

⁹ Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (U Virginia P, 2017), 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Polity, 2017), 151.

near, he sees their pile of fur cloaks and identifies them as selkies. The young man sneaks close enough to the collection of skins that when the selkies notice him, it is too late: he grabs one of the cloaks, leaving one dancer without her fur after the other selkies scramble for their own and dive into the sea, transformed into seals. The man returns to his village and the seal-woman follows, pleading for the return of her skin. Having thus trapped the selkie in her human form, the man claims her as his spouse, and she is a devoted partner: a loving mother, a good cook and homemaker, and a successful fisher, too. Nonetheless, at every opportunity she searches for her cloak until one day, she discovers it hidden in the gable of their cottage (although in some versions, her daughter innocently discloses its location to her, thus making the child complicit in her mother's abandonment). Once she finds her fur, the selkie immediately leaves her children and husband to return to the sea, once again free to choose her own form.

In one version, her confused children follow her into the ocean and drown.¹² In another version, the seal wife's son is called to the coastline by "a huge shaggy silver seal" to discover his mother's hidden sealskin, returning it to her; she inevitably leaves, even though "you could tell she wanted to stay with her child, she *wanted* to, but something called her, something older than she, older than he, older than time."¹³ In most versions, the selkie ensures her former husband provides well for their children by guaranteeing his fishing success. Despite the way she was treated by her human captor, the selkie demonstrates compassion and ensures the family lives well. As David Thompson relays the story, the husband 'was never as he had been, in his mind' once the selkie returns to the ocean, but

He had more luck fishing than ever before, and when he was out fishing there was often a seal swimming round his boat and there were tears in the eyes of this seal. When the children walked along the shore a seal swam along by them in the sea and cast up to them many-colored fish and beautiful shells.¹⁴

The selkie's suffering is thus not ignored or repressed in the telling: rather, it forms the crux of the story's ethical message. By imprisoning the selkie within her human form so he

¹² As Clair Le Couteur observes, "The Seal Wife's children are never fully hybrid; their place is on land, they cannot shapeshift, and their humanity is not in question" (75). See their article, "Slipping off the Sealskin: Gender, Species, and Fictive Kinship in Selkie Folktales" for a fascinating interrogation of the mythic and material sealskin (published as Peter Le Couteur). Peter Le Couteur, "Slipping Off the Sealskin: Gender, Species, and Fictive Kinship in Selkie Folktales," *The Gender Forum*, 55 (2015): 55–82.

¹³ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (Balentine, 1992), 260, 261.

¹⁴ David Thomson, *The People of the Sea: A Journey in Search of the Seal Legend* (Counterpoint, 2000), 162.

can possess her, the fisherman/husband restricts her agency, subjectivity, self-expression, and autonomy. The moment she can, she abandons her human children and husband to return to her independent, wild and free, fully subjective self. Yet even so she demonstrates compassion and concern for her human family, ensuring her children are well-fed and cared for. Her desire for agency is at the forefront, yet even when she can return to the sea, her weeping and gifts are depicted in attentive detail. She can thus be imagined as no mere metaphor or myth but as an actual being deserving of respect and autonomy, a mysterious creature who links sea and coastline, animal and human, and the entanglement of material oppressions and individual subjectivity: selkies enact becomingness in the transformative spaces between such limiting categorizations.

To demonstrate this transformative liminality further, I turn to two poems written by Irish women for reasons of equal importance: as examples of the warning and inspiration selkies provide, and because both poems speak *from* and *within* the selkie perspective. Both these reasons demonstrate how selkies can unsettle binaries and stimulate innovative ways of thinking in the self-conscious Anthropocene. The first case is the warning, arising from the inspiration of selkies dancing freely. Specifically, even though the seal woman is an ideal wife and mother, her domesticity comes only with severe restrictions on her agency: the stealing and hiding of what enables her true self to *be*. Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill suggests these restraints in her poem “Taimid Damanta, A Dheirfearacha” (translated by Michael Harnett as “We are Damned, my Sisters”). In English:

We preferred to be shoeless by the tide
dancing singly on the wet sand
the piper’s tune coming to us
on the kid spring wind, than to be
indoors making strong tea for the men—
and so we’re damned, my sisters!¹⁵

A paucity of available options toward flourishing exists once someone is seized, captured, subjugated, and coerced into forced labor (or restricted by patriarchal gender norms further inculcated by religious structures, as is implied by being ‘damned’). Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem alludes to the consequences to the selkie’s agency once her cloak is stolen, contrasting forced domesticity with the freedom of dancing on the seashore to the wind’s music. But underpinning that allusion is another: that when she can, she will abandon her family to retake her true form.

The experience of retaking that true form is exemplified in the writings of Eavan Boland, who utilizes shapeshifting female creatures to expand and transform the selkie myth.

¹⁵ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Rhoga Dánta*, trans. Michael Harnett (New Island Publishers, 1993), 15.

Boland evokes the selkie in her own voice, which is uncommon in the traditional stories.¹⁶ The female figure in Boland's poem "The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish" is, as the title states, an active participant in her own transformation and therefore brings embodiment into the foreground of critical inquiry. The short, irregular lines of the poem mirror the embodied conversion step-by-step and piece-by-piece, helping us to imagine the perspective of a selkie herself even though the speaker is not a selkie. Boland is often associated with the creation of an Irish poetry that reframes the roles of women and nationhood within the historical traditions of Ireland, of which selkie tales are a part. As Richard Rankin Russell puts it, she imbues "her own poetry increasingly with a lament for Gaelic Ireland, along with the recuperation of the role of women in Irish history and in Irish poetry."¹⁷ In this poem specifically, readers experience the repossession of agency via Boland's female speaker, who empowers her own transformation. The short, irregular lines mirror the building of a new body, envisioning from *within* the experience in alignment with what it might be like to shift between human and seal forms.

"The Woman Turns Herself Into a Fish" begins with instructions, the first five stanzas composed of imperatives:

Unpod
the bag,
the seed.

Slap
the flanks back.
Flatten

paps.
Make finny,
scaled

¹⁶ I have never heard nor come across a selkie wife story told from the selkie's first-person perspective, although there is valuable work being done in that space of silence. For instance, one anonymous reviewer of this essay pointed me toward Gary Markle's *Selkie Skin* art project, which invites people to wear a 'selkie skin' made of scavenged and reclaimed plastic waste while they float in the ocean. Markle indicates that the "project transforms the wearer into an aquatic creature through a performative garment. This shift in consciousness, even for a brief period, is an attempt to create empathy with the increasingly plastic-filled waters of the world. Even when invisible, oceanic plastic waste at both macro and micro levels are now ubiquitous." (306-8) For more about Markle's project, see Andy Best, "Imagining Godzilla: An Art Research Network Platform," in *Situating Sustainability: A Handbook of Contexts and Concepts*, eds. C.P. Krieg and R. Toivanen (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), 293-330; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-14-20>.

¹⁷ Richard Rankin Russell, "W.B. Yeats and Eavan Boland: Postcolonial Poets?" in *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism*, ed. Deborah Fleming (Locust Hill Press, 2001), 120.

and chill
the slack
and dimple

of the rump.
Pout
the mouth,

brow the eyes.¹⁸

The first instruction, to unpod, is ingenious for the complexity of its meaning: a pod is a group of mammals. Usually, the word is used to describe marine animals but the speaker is in fact leaving a group of terrestrial mammals—human beings—and becoming a marine animal. Additionally, in a crude sense the selkie wife becomes a uterine bag for seminal seed when she is forced into a maternal role while in her human form. Here, the speaker is transforming away from human sexual reproductivity altogether. The short lines strain against themselves as they simultaneously command change and describe the process of transformation, emulating the very act of alteration they describe, plodding toward unpodding.

The first section of the poem ends with the seed unpodded, the repetition gasping for a new breath as a new being:

and now
and now

eclipse
in these hips,
these loins,

the moon,
the blood
flux.¹⁹

This section contains two of the four lines that might be said to have a rhyme: 'eclipse' and 'these hips' underscore the importance of menstrual phases to the speaker's human self and emphasize that they are, in essence, her connection to the lives of all

¹⁸ Eavan Boland, "The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish," in *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990* (W.W. Norton, 1990), 131.

¹⁹ Ibid.

menstruating mammals in all times. Furthermore, the shift from 'the' to 'these' personalizes the speaker's physical changes at exactly the moment the last remnants of human biology fall away: the end of menstruation as lunar eclipse.

The middle stanzas of the poem shift the focus from *becoming* to *being*. The process of transformation is complete and now the *I* of the poem *is*, the product of her own formation, physical, emotional, and creative still:

It's done.
I turn.
I flab upward.

blub-lipped,
hipless,
and I am

sexless,
shed
of ecstasy,

a pale
swimmer
sequin-skinned,

pearling eggs
screamlessly
in seaweed.²⁰

Menstruation, gestation, and birth are exchanged for the hipless and painless releasing of eggs into the seawater (an extension of the release of an egg from the human ovary to be captured by the fallopian tube). 'I am' she exclaims, godlike and beautifully sequined. Here is the beginning of another transformation that extends through the end of the poem, this time of words typically used as nouns becoming verbs: things into action, literally and grammatically.

The third section expresses prior desire and some regret, suggesting that the humanness of the speaker's subjectivity is still present within the marine creature (and vice versa):

It's what

²⁰ Ibid., 132.

I set my heart on.
Yet,

ruddering
and muscling
in the sunless tons

of new freedoms,
still
I feel

a chill pull,
a brightening,
a light, a light:

and how
in my loomy cold,
my greens

still
she moons
in me.²¹

The other—the human other now—still exists in the wateriness of the woman transformed. She is free, the homonym ‘sun/son’ marking her independence from both a human body and her human maternal responsibilities, ‘tons’ of pressure suddenly lifted to become light as the photons of ‘light.’ ‘Sunless tons’ and ‘new freedoms’ also form a near rhyme, only the second in the whole poem and thus further emphasizing those lines. The speaker belongs in a changing and shifting natural world in which she actively participates, still a part of the fish, who, like the selkie, is both human and other yet neither, forever enacting becoming-ness, existing precisely in that in-between place of activity in flux.

For other imaginings of the selkie figure, there are several outstanding Irish films about seal folk that demonstrate the selkies’ embedded entanglement with place and lore in the Atlantic archipelago region. For example, the animated film *Song of the Sea* (2014) is about a young selkie called Saoirse and her human brother Ben. Full of haunting imagery, lush visual and aural beauty, and powerful folkloric messages, the film centers questions related to loss, modernity, and freedom in Ireland. Similarly, its title a reference to the undine, a legendary water creature in European folklore, *Ondine* (2009) likewise explores contemporary Irish relationships and incorporates several traditional shapeshifting figures,

²¹ Ibid., 132-3.

including selkies, mermaids, and other watery beings. The titular character might be a selkie, although the ambiguity of her species makes for part of the film's magic.²² More explicitly selkie-centered is *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), a film set in County Donegal that tells of an ancient family ancestor who married a seal woman, leading to the disappearance of a child, Jamie, who has selkie heritage. Although also about loss, modernity, and freedom, the film's plot is structured around his sister Fiona's efforts to convince the selkies to return him to his human family. Each of these films employ selkies to reveal a less simplistic, more pantheistic way of interacting with the complexities of human animals within the more-than-human world.

As these examples illustrate, selkies demonstrate that the 'human' as a concept is in a constant state of differential becoming, transformative instead of stable. For this human, the Anthropocene marks "a finite space in which 'we' are now all joined in a tragedy of the commons," as Claire Colebrook demonstrates.²³ Dipesh Chakrabarty appropriately problematizes the concept of a stabilizing, overarching human species, arguing that "We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. [...] One never experiences being a concept."²⁴ In contrast to a vague concept of humanness, by enacting becoming-ness, selkies make explicit what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call 'becoming-animal,' a disruption of concretized identity and an undermining of the central premise of animal ontology (which is that animals have substantial essences or structures that are identifiable and stable). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari suggest instead that there are historically contingent and variable processes of 'becoming animal' that are constituted as activity-in-flux. As James Urpeth succinctly states of becoming-animals, "Flux, change, and relation are, for them, more real than permanence, stability, and identity."²⁵ Such organisms are not coherent systems with constancy; instead, becoming-animals are indeterminate entities, never finished fluxing between various impermanent conditions. They are always entangled so the "boundaries of identity are lost in the representation of species' irreducible interdependence and mutual implications in each other's lives and deaths" as Kari Weil puts it.²⁶ Selkies make explicit this seeming

²² Kirsten Møllegaard astutely and insightfully demonstrates how *Ondine* problematizes generic conventions and engages postmodern intertextuality in relation to contemporary issues of migration and settlement in her chapter, "Global Flows in Coastal Contact Zones: Selkie Lore in Neil Jordan's *Ondine* and Solveig Eggerz's *Seal Woman*," in *Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag*, eds. Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye (Denver: Utah State University Press, 2014), 93-111.

²³ Claire Colebrook, *The Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Volume One* (Open Humanities Press, 2014), 10.

²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, 2 (Winter 2009): 220.

²⁵ James Urpeth, "Animal Becomings," in *Animal Philosophy* ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (Continuum, 2004), 102.

²⁶ Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (Columbia UP, 2012), xxii.

paradox: neither exclusively human nor animal by being both simultaneously, they foreground the inextricable—but often elided—linkages and fluidity between human beings and the rest of the living world.

Yet, as Melanie Challenger points out in *How to Be Animal: A New History of What It Means to be Human*, many humans struggle to identify commonalities between their own lived experience of the world and the fact that each nonhuman life also has its own lived experience of the world. Those experiences also matter deeply. She argues, “We are surrounded by evidence that intelligence and awareness are a normal part of life. Instinct or otherwise, everything around us expresses an unquantifiable degree of complexity and skill. What prevents us from valuing it all more highly?”²⁷ She answers: “Our intuition tells us that we are not really the creature of muscle and bone that stares out from the mirror. We are the conscious thing in our heads. In this way, we don’t have to believe in dualism to be under the illusion of it. We are trapped in a sensation of personal experience.”²⁸ Yet that illusion can be interrogated, as it is in Boland’s poem, where the speaker only voices her ‘I’ once transformed: “It’s done. / I turn,” even as the human self persists: “still / She moons / in me.”²⁹ Nonetheless, even after Charles Darwin’s expansive evolutionary theory recognized human-species relationships with other animals (and as descended specifically from ocean-dwellers³⁰), the greater Western tradition has largely preserved human uniqueness as separate from the more-than-human world, reifying the human species as an exception to the rest of animal nature. As I have illustrated elsewhere, this is human exceptionalism, “imbricated in the discourse of progressivism, a symptom of how Darwin’s evolutionary concept is enlisted in support of a view of progress with humans at the apex of evolutionary innovation.”³¹ Within the discourses of advancement and liberal humanism, the concept of human exceptionalism is an unavoidable outcome of the enlistment of Darwin’s evolutionary theory in support of a progressive teleology.

In contrast, Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism offers a crucial lens through which to reconsider practices of human exceptionalism and the alternative structures of the sort inspired by the figure of the selkie. Barad urges an accounting “of the entangled materializations of which we are a part.”³² Her work focuses attention on the embeddedness of human bodies in the larger environment, the vast web of changing

²⁷ Melanie Challenger, *How to Be Animal: A New History of What It Means to be Human* (Penguin, 2021), 111.

²⁸ Challenger, 120.

²⁹ Boland, 132, 133.

³⁰ In a letter to Charles Lyell, Darwin describes human ancestry as interwoven specifically with the ocean, writing “Our ancestor was an animal which breathed water, had a swim bladder, a great swimming tail, an imperfect skull, and undoubtedly was a hermaphrodite!” ‘Letter 2647 – Darwin, C. R. to Lyell, Charles, 10 Jan (1860),’ *Darwin Correspondence Project*; URL: <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-2647.xml>, accessed 20 February 2025.

³¹ Sarah E. McFarland, *Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 3.

intra-actions that compose reality and “entail an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering”³³ and puts humans back into “the world-body space in its dynamic structuration.”³⁴ Selkies can be a valuable part of that dynamic ethical transformation: their morphology is itself, literally, an operating principle, whereby flux and transformation is their materiality.

By centering entanglement with the rest of the living world, selkies can arouse different ethical responses, many of which arise in the variety of legends about the selkie folk. There are tales about male selkies seducing lonely women, stories about human women finding baby seals on the shore and nurturing them to maturity to be later rewarded, and tales of drowning fishers saved by seals.³⁵ The selkie wife tales, in contrast, reveal the consequences of violating another’s bodily integrity and dignity by denying the agency and subjecthood of another being and reducing her to the status of manipulatable object. Maria Tatar observes that “Tales about swan maidens, selkies, seals, and mermaids may once have been far more widespread than they are today. One critic has argued that the tales can be found ‘in virtually every corner of the world,’ because in most cultures ‘woman was a symbolic outsider, was the other, and marriage demanded an intimate involvement in a world never quite her own.’”³⁶ These stories’ ethical points—deploring the callous treatment of human and nonhuman others—challenge the institutionally-sanctioned objectification of nonhuman animals and the dehumanization of women and colonial subjects by emphasizing the ambiguous and liberating aspects of selkies. They encourage “thinking from within the space of indistinction,”³⁷ to use the words of Matthew Calarco in another context: “Thought and practice that originates from within a space of indistinction aims to reorient us along lines that enable alternative modes of living, relating, and being with others of all sorts (human and nonhuman).”³⁸ Selkies make the imbrication of the human *as an animal* abundantly clear, negating notions of progressive advancement. Whether from ‘natural’ to ‘cultural,’ ‘wild’ to ‘domesticated,’ or ‘savage’ to ‘civilized,’ such classifications become irrelevant.

³² Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke UP, 2007), 384.

³³ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁵ See, for example, the stories collected in Duncan Williamson’s *Tales of the Seal People* (Interlink, 2005).

³⁶ Maria Tatar, “Introduction: The Odd Couple in Tales as Old as Time,” in *Beauty and the Beast: Classic Tales about Animal Brides and Grooms from Around the World*, ed. Maria Tatar (Penguin, 2017), xviii.

³⁷ Matthew Calarco, “Identity, Difference, Indistinction,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 11, 2 (Fall 2011): 56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

Such alternative modes of being construct experience within lateral, not hierarchical, expressions of mutual interaction. Selkies make explicit the ways that human and nonhuman are mutually vulnerable in a shared landscape of bodily experience, which is deeply relevant to the self-conscious Anthropocene and the increasingly catastrophic climate change that marks it. Selkie stories demonstrate a worldview in which the boundary between humans and other living beings is flexible and where species categories, as well as other constructions, are fluid instead of stable. Beings in human form might be a mingling of both human and animal; animal shapes might be human beings. In other words, selkies reveal that life exists along a continuum linking humans with other animals. Accordingly, they raise important questions about the relationships between humans and other animals, between humans and each other, and between the political, cultural, and economic structures that inculcate discriminatory, oppressive, and exploitative practices. Perhaps most importantly, selkies embody lessons about living appropriately in the community of beings with whom we share the world. From the perspective reflected by selkies, there is no stability in relations of humans with their environments, because each is simultaneously both. The final warning in the selkie figure, then, is a reminder that recognizing and revering the materiality and agency of the natural world is ethical human behavior, a particularly relevant moral code in the self-conscious Anthropocene.

Selkies are important reminders about the subjectivity of others within our shared ecological worlds. They help us remember that not all things are as they seem, that first appearances might not tell the whole truth, and that it is always better to respect another's perspective than to ignore or silence it. In the words of Barad, their 'always entangled' natures queer the perception of duality. Seal folk are "iteratively reconfigured though each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future,"³⁹ or human and animal in a meaningful or applicable way. These are important ethical messages. A perspective that centers the inseparability of human and nonhuman worlds like selkies invalidates species and individual exceptionalisms and is a valuable example of what Donna Haraway calls 'entanglement.' Invoking Haraway, Alexis Shotwell observes that entanglement is "inescapable, even when we cannot track or directly perceive this entanglement. It is hard for us to examine our connection with *unbearable pasts* with which we might reckon better, our implication in *impossibly complex presents* through which we might craft different modes of response, and our aspirations for *different futures* toward which we might shape different worlds-yet-to-come."⁴⁰ Selkies represent valuable ways of thinking about the challenges facing us all in the twenty-first century. They offer an opportunity to see forward into new ways of being toward each other, toward other life forms, and

³⁹ Barad, iv.

⁴⁰ Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (U Minnesota P, 2016), 8.

toward inevitable ecological presents and even more catastrophic near futures. The self-conscious Anthropocene is an epoch marked by denial, procrastination, failure, and an inability to effectively reduce precarity and harm, so re-envisioning the potent lessons taught by the selkie figure is particularly relevant. The specificity of struggle, dignity, resilience, and victory mapped by the seal wife aligns with potential responses to the root causes of the climate crisis: racism, sexism, capitalistic exploitation, and other forms of oppression that dehumanize and other in strategic and tactical ways, alongside explicit warnings of the dire consequences of such behaviors. They model and complicate Haraway's concept of 'response-ability,' which acknowledges the integrated network of human and nonhuman actors within which humans have responsibility to respond.⁴¹ They are ethical, environmentally-beneficial enactments of what she calls "significant otherness-in-connection."⁴² Allusions to the seal wife demand us to scrutinize and transform our relationships with the ecosystems and nonhuman others with whom we share the earth, toward recognizing affinities and toward celebrating otherness-in-connection. Film and literary allusions to seal folk further attend to the cultural fabric of histories, colonialization, genocide, and migration, foreshadowing today's diverse complexity of experiences amidst global climate change.

What happens, then, when thinking with selkies and from a seal wife point of view, we are response-able and intentionally, purposefully weave our unique individual selves back into the living world? In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer observes that "people of the modern world suffer a great sadness, a 'species loneliness'—estrangement from the rest of Creation. We have built this isolation with our fear, with our arrogance, and with our homes brightly lit against the night."⁴³ The selkie who ensures her human family never goes hungry illustrates ways to engage by building compassionate multi-species community centered around shared responsibility, and furthermore encourages us to bear witness to our changing worlds as self-conscious members of the Anthropocene. What I am proposing is a determined, purposeful shifting in the way we participate in worlding, toward attending to all sensory experience, upheld by curiosity as a disposition and wonder as an inclination, open and welcoming of opportunities for astonishment. The persistent illusion of human subjectivity—the world of normal experience—is that I am separate from, rather than entangled, immersed, inextricably interconnected with the various material agencies that are categorized as the environment. As Rustick observes, "When the mind awakens to non-dual oneness, fixed designations and appropriations fall away. [...] We are then capable of living as wise, compassionate individuals keenly aware

⁴¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke UP, 2016), 105-15.

⁴² Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 51.

⁴³ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed, 2013), 358.

of our interbeingness with all and making ethical choices accordingly.”⁴⁴ In the midst of the self-conscious Anthropocene, resilience and empowerment exist in openness to the experience of wonder at entanglement with the wider world and curiosity about the various participatory and agential unfoldings that comprise the more-than-human biosphere. Jenny Odell makes a similar point, explaining that “I’ve also learned that patterns of attention—what we choose to notice and what we do not—are how we render reality for ourselves, and thus have a direct bearing on what we feel is possible at any given time. These aspects, taken together, suggest to me the revolutionary potential of taking back our attention.”⁴⁵ Inhabiting embodied perspectives toward astonishment encourages an intensified capacity for ecological consciousness, re-enchantment with the rich saturation of sensory experience, an appreciation of our material entanglement, and a recognition that all of us—all beings living on this planet—are in this, together.

About the Author

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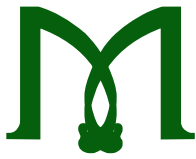
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⁴⁴ Rustick, 4.

⁴⁵ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Melville House, 2019), xxiii.

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It Flows from the Heart: Kiinoomaagewag nibi manidoog

BARBARA MOKTTHEWENKWE WALL

Abstract

Through a combination of reflective, creative, and academic writing in Anishinaabemowin and English, this research article explores Kiinoomaagewag nibi manidoog—Knowledge that originates with the water spirits — and the infinite, intimate relationship between water, Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe women, the cosmos, and all of life. It explores Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe women's roles and responsibilities in the care taking of water, and the parallel responsibilities of the moon and water-related metaphysical beings. In addition, the concept of water and water spirits as relatives, teachers, and sustainers is discussed.

Keywords: water, moon, Anishinaabe, cosmos

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Résumé

Grâce à une combinaison d'écritures réfléchies, créatives et académiques, d'anishinaabemowin et d'anglais, cet article de recherche explore Kiinoomaagewag nibi manidoog - la connaissance qui provient des esprits de l'eau - et la relation infinie et intime entre l'eau, les femmes Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe, le cosmos et toute la vie. Il explore les rôles et responsabilités des



femmes Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe dans la prise en charge de l'eau, ainsi que les responsabilités parallèles de la lune et des êtres métaphysiques liés à l'eau. En outre, le concept de l'eau et des esprits de l'eau en tant que parents, enseignants et soutiens est discuté.

Mots-clés : eau, lune, Anishinaabe, cosmos

Miigwech kinah gego emiigwien indinawemaaganag.¹ Miigwech Nibi Manidoog² for your generous loving gifts of Knowledge and guidance. Miinwaa miigwech kinah gego emiigwien Nibi.³ You sustain and nurture all of life. You are our first medicine, our oldest teacher and relative. Gokmis D'bik Giizis⁴ watches over and influences you, just as she watches over and guides us as Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag.⁵ We honour, protect, and carry you in reciprocity for all that you are, and all that you do. G'chi miigwech.⁶

This article is an expression of gratitude for our relatives and shares respect for all that they provide. Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe ways of being and our Knowledges are derived through relationship with these relatives residing within Mtigwaakiing eh G'chi Zaagiganag.⁷ Nibi,⁸ and miskwaabik,⁹ Gokmis D'bik Giizis, the metaphysical beings, and the spirits of the watery Anishinaabe Cosmos are elder relatives who, along with the more-than-human beings, are our teachers. This article articulates the infinite and intimate relationship between water, Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe women and all of life, discusses and demonstrates the ways in which we come to know and be known through relationality, and shares some of our ways of honouring our kinship relationships.¹⁰ The

¹ Thank you, all my relatives, for who you are and what you bring.

² Thank you, Water Spirits.

³ Thank you, Water, for who you are and what you bring. Nibi is Water existing on the surface of the earth, lake or river water.

⁴ Our grandmother, the nighttime sun; Gokmis is our grandmother, Nokmis is my grandmother. Giizis is sun. D'bik refers to night; dibikad means it is night.

⁵ Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe women; The Bodwewaadmii are known in English as the Potawatomi and are one of the many Nations of Indigenous Peoples that comprise the Anishinaabe People. Kwewag is women; kwe is woman, or a being imbued with feminine energy. Throughout this article Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe(g) are referred to using Bodwewaadmii(g) or Anishinaabe(g) or both.

⁶ A great thank you; thank you very much.

⁷ The forests of the Great Lakes basin.

⁸ Water.

⁹ Copper; literally red rock.

¹⁰ Sacred stories are not shared within this piece; I have been careful to not share details of ceremonial practices; I have shared my experiences resulting from ceremony and do this to demonstrate that ceremony is a source of knowledge.

meanings of Anishinaabemowin words and phrases are explained in footnotes at their first use.

Before articulating Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe relationality, I will follow our practices and respectfully introduce myself. The practice of sharing who we are in relation to our ancestors, the land and waters, and the spirits is essential in establishing personal accountability while acknowledging our teachers, family and community or collective Knowledges. I am the daughter of Waasey Ahnkwat-ban and Waaskwonehnsan-ban¹¹ and granddaughter of Asa Elwood Wall-ban,¹² a mixed ancestry, displaced and enrolled member of the federally recognized Citizen Potawatomi Nation of Shawnee Oklahoma. I was not raised in my grandfather's community, nor was I raised immersed in Anishinaabeodziwin.¹³

Remembering and reclaiming our ways of knowing and being is my life's work. My relationships with Elders and Knowledge Holders¹⁴ are the source of stories, teachings, my learnings and growing understanding, as well as the ceremonies I have been given to carry. I am guided by my Bodwewaadmii noosewin—Moktthewenke¹⁵—and ndoodem—Waawashkesh.¹⁶ My truths originate with and are inspired by relationship with Creation, our homelands along the shores of Mishii'igan¹⁷ and the Cosmos. These interconnected spaces are the sources of our being—our Knowledges, Ceremonies, stories, and languages—Anishinaabeodziwin. Anishinaabemowin¹⁸ is the sound of these spaces and the oral expression of our relationality. Our language holds our teachings, stories, and dreams.¹⁹

¹¹ The suffix -ban is used to denote a person who has died and no longer walks the earth in human form. Waasey Ahnkwat-ban is my father, Waaskwonehnsan-ban is my mother.

¹² My father's father was a survivor of Chilocco Indian Agricultural School in Oklahoma (then known as Indian Territory) and Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. His childhood and teenage years were spent within the United States Indian Boarding School system. Asa was the last of my immediate family to live in Shawnee, Oklahoma. His mother, Rachel Johnson, is the daughter of Sophia Vieux and Jacob Johnson and the granddaughter of Louis Vieux (Menominee/Potawatomi and French) and Shanote (St. Joseph Potawatomi).

¹³ The art of being Anishinaabe—embodying of all aspects of the Anishinaabe way of life, philosophy, psychology, culture, teachings, spirituality, customs, and history.

¹⁴ These generous, loving humans include David Big Bear Johnson-ban and his brother Richard Johnson-ban, Zhngos Stewart King-ban, Gidigaa Migizi Doug Williams-ban, Lillian Rice-ban, Punkin Shananaquet, Sydney Martin, Majel DeMarsh, Andy Jackson, Brenda and Phil Shopodock, Leanne Simpson, Tim Watkinson and others.

¹⁵ Bodwewaadmii name, spirit name; the spirits know me as Moktthewenkwe.

¹⁶ Clan; I am related to the deer, I am deer clan.

¹⁷ Lake Michigan

¹⁸ Language of the Anishinaabe Peoples

¹⁹ Barbara Moktthewenkwe Wall, "Anishinaabeodziwin miinwaa Gikendasswin: Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being through relationality," in *Unsettling Education: Decolonizing and Indigenizing the Land*, ed. by Patrick Lewis, Anna-Leah King and Kathleen O'Reilly (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2024), 142.

My Elders and teachers have shared that we must look to the sound of these spaces for truth and guidance.²⁰ I work to continually wear our teachings²¹ and in doing so choose to incorporate Anishinaabemowin²² into my writing.

Reflective and reflexive thinking is essential in making meaning and the wearing of our teachings. Personal reflections are included within this article to ethically articulate my respectful engagement with Anishinaabeodziwin, Ceremony, and the learnings gained from both.

Kinoomaagewag Nibi Manidoog

Walking barefoot in the sand of mitaawangaang²³ at the eastern end of Three Mile Lake, I hear the gentle rhythmic sound of lapping waves. The heat of Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis²⁴ is strong, despite the soft cool morning breeze. I gaze over zaaga'igan²⁵ to the tall majestic zhiingwaakoog²⁶ that long ago emerged from the sandy soil and rocks of the shoreline. A thin transparent veil blurs the distant island as water transforms to rising mist. Loons swim, skimming the sparkling water as they raise their red eyes to the sky and extend their necks to sound their voices. It is here, I've been told, Maangwag²⁷ come dance. A circle of seven rising out of the water, flapping outstretched wings in unison. Naami'iwed miinwaa manidoo-nagamon²⁸ to honour Nibi Manidoog and the water beings.²⁹

²⁰ Moktthewenkwe Barbara Wall, "Nokmisag: Bemnigying," in *Grandmothers and Grandmothering: Creative and Critical Contemplations in Honour of Our Women Elders*, ed. by Kathy Mantas (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2021), 242.

²¹ To wear our teachings is to continually embrace and apply our teachings and to strive to live in accordance with our cultural values. Edna Manitowabi, personal communication, 2011; Edna Manitowabi, INDG6600 Indigenous Knowledge Seminar, Trent University, Peterborough, ON, November 12, 2012.

²² I am a committed language learner, not a fluent speaker. I predominantly use the dialect of the Wasauksing First Nation, Ontario, the home community of my husband, Zhngos Stewart King-ban. My vocabulary is supplemented by the online Ojibwe People's Dictionary, and published dictionaries by Baraga, Rhodes, and the Forest County Potawatomi Community. I choose to use words from these various to demonstrate this way of language learning. I have used the double vowel system consistently, with the exception of my name which is written as it was given to me. All mistakes are mine, and more than likely there are many.

²³ On the beach

²⁴ Grandfather helper the sun; Mishomis is grandfather, shkaabewis is a helper, and Giizis in the sun

²⁵ The lake or a lake

²⁶ White pines

²⁷ Loons

²⁸ They give a dance and a spiritual song

²⁹ Personal reflection of experience at Three Mile Lake, Wasauksing First Nation, 2012

We are water beings, living within a watery Cosmos. We have been nurtured, sustained and taught by Nibi and our more-than-human water being relatives since time immemorial. We have traveled the waters of the Cosmos by jiimanag³⁰ for millennia. Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabeg, and all of life, are in an infinite and intimate relationship with Nibi and the Water Spirits. Nibi in all her forms, as I understand, is a great connector and physical manifestation of life's energy. She moves within and on Shkaakmiikwe³¹ and within us and the other beings of Creation. As Nibi flows, transforms, and cycles throughout the realms of the cosmos, she unites Creation. Metaphysical water beings protect Nibi, Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe, and the other water beings residing within Mtigwaaniing³² and Gahnoowaaning.³³ Gokmis D'bik Giizis resides in Nangoskwaaning,³⁴ the third cosmic realm above her daughter Shkaakmiikwe. The cyclical waning and waxing of our Grandmother and Matriarch, and her pull on Creation's waters, continually guides Bodwewaadmii women's responsibilities and relationships. We are her Nooshehnsag;³⁵ our umbilical cords stretch deep, spiralling through our familial lineage from our first mother to Gokmis D'bik Giizis, and to our ancestral great grandmothers and then farther beyond to Skywoman and into the world that she created as she fell from the Skyworld through the realms of Creation.³⁶ We honour, nurture, and maintain this relationality through story, song, and ceremony and by fulfilling our responsibilities.

Our women and female-bodied³⁷ humans are life givers. We are co-creators and the only door through which new human life can enter this world.³⁸ Kwewag carry that new life surrounded and protected by Nibi within the water vessel of our wombs, just as we carry Nibi in vessels of miskwaabik. The feminine energy and life-giving abilities of Bodwewaadmii kwewag mirrors those of our first mother, Shkaakmiikwe. Through our teachings and lived experience we come to understand the Earth as ourselves.³⁹ Our

³⁰ Canoes; jiiman(ag) is canoe(s)

³¹ The Earth, our first mother

³² Mtigwaaning is the place of the trees; mtig(oog) is tree(s)

³³ Gahnoowaaning is the place where the golden eagle flies; Gahnnoo is golden eagle

³⁴ Nangoskwaaning is the Starworld; nangos(ag) is star(s)

³⁵ Grandchildren (plural); *nooshehn* is grandchild

³⁶ Wall, "Nokmisag: Bemnigying," 241.

³⁷ This is to acknowledge the gender fluidity that exists within Anishinaabeodziiwin and to recognize that female-bodied humans do not necessarily identify as women.

³⁸ Edna Manitowabi. "Conversation with Edna Manitowabi, Deb McGregor and Sylvia Plain," *Re-Igniting the Sacred Power of Creation: Essential Knowledges for Transformative Action* (conference presentations, Trent University, Peterborough, ON, April 23, 2016).

³⁹ Edna Manitowabi quoted in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Pub., 2011), 36.

human vessels and the bodies of the more- than-human beings are comprised of Nibi and asinag⁴⁰ just like Shkaakmiikwe and Gokmis D'bik Giizis. We are all connected.

*Sitting on the rocks at the edge of the Magentawan River I gaze over the still and deep water pooled in front of me, to the fast-moving water flowing beyond. She teaches us, Nibi. Patience, perseverance, and beauty can be learned by watching her and listening to her song as she moves sometimes calmly, other times forcefully, around or over obstacles in her path.*⁴¹

Nibi shaped and created the landforms and waterways of Mtigwaakiing eh G'chi Zaaginanag.⁴² Thus, she has shaped and created Anishinaabeodziwin as well, for the Great Lakes and eastern woodlands are not only our historic and contemporary homelands, but they are also the spiritual landscape and context of our ways of knowing and being. Mtigwaakiing eh G'chi Zaaginanag were "formed by and embedded with the regenerative potential of the First Ones who gave it form."⁴³ These First Ones are the asinag manidoog,⁴⁴ nibi manidoog,⁴⁵ and Nibi herself.⁴⁶ These First Ones are our ancient and original ancestors.⁴⁷ They are eknoomaagetag⁴⁸ who demonstrate and teach us that "Nishinaabeg life is continual, reciprocal, and reflective."⁴⁹ We gain Kiinoomaagewag aki manidoog miinwaa nibi manidoog, knowledge from our relationship with the spirits of the

⁴⁰ Rock; asin(ag)

⁴¹ Personal reflection of experience at Magentawan First Nation, May 2012

⁴² Barbara Moktthewenkwe Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin* (PhD diss., Trent University, 2022), 47.

⁴³ Darlene Johnston. *Connecting People to Place: Great Lakes Aboriginal History in Cultural Context*, (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Attorney General, 2006), 6.

⁴⁴ Spirits of the Rocks; asin(ag) is rock(s), manidoog(g) is spirit(s)

⁴⁵ Water spirits, or spirits associated with water; nibi is water; manidoo(g) is spirit(s)

⁴⁶ Wall, "Anishinaabeodziwin," 143.

⁴⁷ The majority of water on earth came into being 4.5 billion years ago when our solar system was formed and before the Earth was formed. "A good fraction of terrestrial water likely formed at the very beginning of the Solar System's birth when it was a cold cloud of gas and dust, frozen and conserved during the various steps that led to the formation of planets, asteroids, and comets and was eventually transmitted to the nascent Earth." Cecilia Ceccarelli, and Du Fujun, "We Drink Good 4.5-Billion-Year-Old Water." *Elements (Quebec)* 18, no. 3 (2022): 159 <https://doi.org/10.2138/gselements.18.3.155> Water likely played a role in the sequestering of the building blocks of life onto condensing gas and dust and rocky bodies. These rocky bodies later delivered the building blocks of life to Earth during its formation. Evan Gough, "Earth's Water is 4.5 Billion Years Old," *The Universe Today*, Space and Astronomy News, accessed November 2, 2023, <https://www.universetoday.com/159204/earths-water-is-4-5-billion-years-old/>

⁴⁸ Teachers

⁴⁹ Leanne Betasamosake, *A Short History of the Blockade: Giant Beavers, Diplomacy, and Regeneration in Nishnaabewin* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2021), 3.

land and the spirits of the water. Nibi manidoog lovingly gift⁵⁰ Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag with Kiinoomaagewag⁵¹ through reciprocal relationship.

Nibi, our first medicine and nurturer of life,⁵² is indeed a remarkable teacher,⁵³ and our oldest teacher and relative. As we observe her ability to flow and move, and to transform herself through evaporation, condensation, and sublimation into a multiple of states of being she teaches and inspires us. We learn how to nurture, how to cleanse, and that is possible to simultaneously exhibit strength, power and gentleness. We learn to use our voices for song, and that we as a reflection of both Nibi and Shkaakmiikwe are beautiful.

The Great Lakes, G'chi Zaaginanag, nurture Mno Bemaadiziwin and all beings that reside here. We are in relation with these lakes and the water they cradle. G'chi Zaaginanag carry our past, present, and future.⁵⁴

Relationality

Our connection to Shkaakmiikwe is strong, for our umbilical cords extend beyond humanity, transcending time, space, and connection. Our cords extend into and emerge from the land and waters, extend into the future to those yet to come, and extend into the past to generations upon generations of our Grandmothers. Shkaakmiikwe is truly our mother—providing us with sustenance and nurturing—she is our first teacher, our essential source of Knowledge, relationship, understanding and beauty. We, as Anishinaabekwewag, mirror our mother. We are comprised of asin and Nibi just as she is. A fire burns intensely within us, as it does within our mother. Water is the lifeblood of our mother and of ourselves; Nibi cleanses us both, internally and externally. Water is life; water gives life. Water unites all females, all humans, and all our family of Creation. Water is the beginning; it flows from the heart.⁵⁵

Relationality and kinship are fundamental to Anishinaabeodziwin or Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe ontology; both comprise the philosophical underpinning of our intellectual

⁵⁰ Wendy Geniusz, *Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive: Decolonizing Botanical Anishinaabe Teachings*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 67.

⁵¹ Knowledges

⁵² Wall, “Anishinaabeodziwin,” 143.

⁵³ Aimeé Craft, Anishinaabe Nibi Inaakonigewin Report (2014): 25. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3433235> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3433235>

⁵⁴ Wall, “Anishinaabeodziwin,” 144.

⁵⁵ Personal reflection, Keene, ON, March 2013. Adapted from: Wall, “It Flows for the Heart,” 103-104

tradition.⁵⁶ Anishinaabe People live within a great extended family that is planetary and cosmic, rather than simply human. The universe itself is a family—grandfather sun, creator, grandmother moon, mother earth.⁵⁷ Our relationships with Creation and the cosmos are the life force of a culturally nuanced, complex reality and the expression of gendered responsibilities and roles.⁵⁸ Relationality is how we make meaning. Our lands and waters, and the beings whom we live alongside within Mtigwaaning are our relations and sources of Knowledge. These relatives are our teachers and knowledge holders. We know ourselves through this relationality, and reciprocally it is through kinship that our more-than-human relatives know us.⁵⁹ Understanding kinship and relationality requires action and the fulfilling of responsibilities. Making meaning⁶⁰ involves love and reverence. Making meaning needs our “attention to the process of connection”⁶¹ and understanding our place within the spaces of the cosmos. Manidookewin,⁶² or Ceremony, facilitates this process and emphasizes love, reverence, and reciprocity.⁶³

Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe Conceptualization of the Cosmos

Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabeg’s relationality extends upwards from Shkaakmiikwe and throughout the realms of the Cosmos—Mtigwaaning, Gahnoowaaning, Nangoskwaaning and Manidoowaaning. Ininiwag,⁶⁴ getsijig,⁶⁵ mindimooyenyag⁶⁶ and binoojiinyag⁶⁷ walk within Mtigwaaning. It is here that we live, work, learn, raise our families, and hold Ceremony within the treed and watery landscapes of Mtigwaakiing eh G’chi Zaagiganag. This place of the trees, Mtigwaaniing, mookijiwanibiigoon,⁶⁸ ziibiwan and ziibinsan⁶⁹ and zaagiganag is the first realm of the Cosmos. Our elder relatives—the trees, food plants,

⁵⁶ Barbara Moktthewenkwe Wall, “Living and Dying mno bemaadiziiwin: Wearing Our Teachings in Contemporary Times,” *Turtle Island Journal of Indigenous Health*, Vol. 1 No. 3 (November 9, 2023): page 2 <https://doi.org/10.33137/tijih.v1i3.38501>

⁵⁷ Lea Foushee and Renee Burneau, *Sacred Water, Water for Life*. (Lake Elmo, MN: North American Water Office, 2010): 98-100.

⁵⁸ Patricia Dudgeon and Abigail Bray, "Indigenous Relationality: Women, Kinship and the Law" *Genealogy* 3, no. 2 (2019): 2 – 3, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020023>

⁵⁹ Lauren Tynan, What is relationality? Indigenous knowledges, practices and responsibilities with kin. *Cultural Geographies*, 28(4), (2019): 597-610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211029287>

⁶⁰ Kathleen Absolon, *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know: Indigenous Re-search Methodologies*. (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2022)

⁶¹ Patricia Dudgeon and Abigail Bray, "Indigenous Relationality: Women, Kinship and the Law" *Genealogy* 3, no. 2 (2019.): 3, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020023>

⁶² Ceremony; the art of having spiritual power and conducting a ceremony

⁶³ Dudgeon, Patricia, and Abigail Bray. 2019. "Indigenous Relationality: Women, Kinship and the Law" *Genealogy* 3, no. 2 (2019): 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020023>

⁶⁴ Men; inini is man

⁶⁵ Elder(s); Getsig is Elder, Getsijig is Elders

⁶⁶ Older women; mindimooyen is an older woman, mindimooyenyag is older women

⁶⁷ Children; binoojiinhs is a child, binoojiinyag is children

and medicines— and our water-being relatives and the more-than-human beings⁷⁰ reside here as well. The water being relatives include giigoohnyag,⁷¹ turtles, gnebigoo,⁷² shishiibag,⁷³ maangwag and other water birds.

Enveloped in nagamonan⁷⁴ of the orioles, I sit here—jiigibiig,⁷⁵ a liminal space existing along the water's edge, the transition between worlds physical and spiritual. Reflections of Mtigwaaning join Nibi and sky. The medicine of mookijwanibiig is encircled by shining white sand, glowing through clear turquoise water. Nibiseh Manidoosag⁷⁶ and Nokmisag dance together adorned in green, singing ancient songs. The circle of old ones faces inwards toward the source of life, knowledge and sustenance. Joy and connection honour her.

My song lifts with the spiral of pwaagan aatig,⁷⁷ both echoing of the spiral of life and the simultaneity of time. Animikii binesiag⁷⁸ add their voices preparing to bring water from the skyworld. Their arrival expands that sacred liminal space. Jiigibiig and Mtigwaaning transform into the green fire of Waasnode,⁷⁹ and the wind picks up carrying prayers, smoke, and gratitude.⁸⁰

Michi Shibzhii, the underwater panther,⁸¹ is the leader of the water beings and a metaphysical being or Manidoo. Other manidoog travel into and out of Mtigwaaning depending on the seasonal cycle, the faces of Gokmis D'bik Giizis, and when they might be called on by the Bodwewaadmii for assistance. Seven kwewag manidoog, helpers to Gokmis D'bik Giizis, watch over the waters of Mtigwaaning and work to heal and protect Shkaakmiikwe, Nibi in all her forms and the grandchildren of Gokmis—the Bodwewaadmiig. One watches over mookijwanibiigoon, another is the caretaker of ziibiwan and ziibinsan, and another takes care of G'chi Zaagiganag. Three others watch

⁶⁸ Springs; mookijwanibiigoon is springs, mookijwanibiig is one spring. Mokthwen is spring using the Bodwewaadmii dialect of Anishinaabemowin.

⁶⁹ Rivers and streams/creeks; ziibi(wan) is river(s), ziibins(an) is stream(s)/creek(s)

⁷⁰ These beings include the crawlers and insects, birds, and four leggeds

⁷¹ Fish (plural); giigohn is a singular fish

⁷² Snakes (plural); gnebig is a singular snake

⁷³ Ducks (plural); shiishib is a singular duck

⁷⁴ Songs

⁷⁵ Shore of a lake or body of water

⁷⁶ Water spirits

⁷⁷ Pipe stem; pwaagan is a ceremonial pipe, aatig is the stem or stick

⁷⁸ Thunderbirds; Animikii is a thunderer, binesi(wag) are bird(s)

⁷⁹ The fire that burns from afar; Northern Lights, *aurora borealis*

⁸⁰ Personal reflection, Pokégnék Bodéwadmik Akiing, August 2016. First published in my dissertation, modified for this article. Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 299.

⁸¹ The underwater panther; Michi means someone with great spiritual power, Shibzhii is a cougar, panther or mountain lion.

over Nibi that transcends Mtigwaaning and Gahnoowaaning—aankwatoon and awan,⁸² gimiwan,⁸³ and goon.⁸⁴ The seventh kwewag manidoog is responsible for birth water, the water within a woman's womb when she is carrying new life. Pregnant women, as co-creators spiritually reside in Gahnoowaaning.

Bodwewaadmii oral tradition tell us of Michi Shibzhii and their incredible strength and abilities to travel both through the waters of Mtigwaaning as well as through the soil and rock of Shkaakmiikwe.⁸⁵ Other stories share that it is Michi Shibzhii that gifted our ancestors with Miskwaabik for medicine and healing.⁸⁶

Miskwaabik, created deep within Shkaakmiikwe by Nibi, resides on and below her surface in Mtigwaakiing eh G'chi Zaagiganag. Miskwaabik carries Knowledge of the subterranean layers of the cosmos within Shkaakmiikwe and like Nibi, is medicine transmitting healing and spiritual energy as well as Knowledges.⁸⁷

Miskwaabik miinwaa Nibi

Prior to the shaping of Mtigwaakiing eh G'chi Zaagiganag by Nibi as mikwam,⁸⁸ magmatic Nibi assisted in the formation of the asinag of Shkaakmiikwe. Nibi heated by the fire within Shkaakmiikwe and in the form of mineralising hydrothermal fluids injected pure Miskwaabik into the cracks and crevices of the basaltic rocks that now comprise much of the land adjacent to and south of Anishinaabewi G'chi Gamii.^{89,90} I understand the deep connection between Miskwaabik and Nibi and acknowledge native copper as one of the gifts lovingly given to the Bodwewaadmi from the lands and manidoog of Great Lakes and eastern woodlands.

Miskwaabik, formed by water and formed into vessels by Anishinaabeg, is used to gather and carry Nibi. My teachers from the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi teachers have shared that Miskwaabik is the gift Shkaakmiikwe gives us; it is “the gift we need to use” to purify, gather and carry Nibi.⁹¹ Majel DeMarsh speaks of the beauty of this generous gift and how our people have used Miskwaabik for healing and many other ways. Our oral tradition

⁸² Clouds and fog; aankwat(oon) is cloud(s), awan is fog

⁸³ Rain

⁸⁴ Snow

⁸⁵ Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 55.

⁸⁶ Sutherland and Moose, “Anang Gikendaasowinan.”

⁸⁷ Wall, “Anishinaabeodziiwin,” (forthcoming)

⁸⁸ Ice

⁸⁹ Lake Superior, or the Great Lake of the Anishinaabeg

⁹⁰ Ron Morton and Carl Gawboy, *Talking Rocks, Geology and 10,000 years of Native American Tradition in the Lake Superior Region*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 85 and 90.

⁹¹ Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 335.

tells us that an Anishinaabekwe was gifted copper by Nibi Manidoog. She brought Miskwaabik to her family and community to be used as medicine—to take away the pain in their bones, strengthen their spiritual senses and lengthen their lifespans, and to make tools and purify water.⁹² In reciprocity and with love Bodwewaadmii Nokmisag,⁹³ Aunties, nimiseniyag,⁹⁴ cousins, and older siblings mirror the generosity of Shkaakmiikwe and Michi Shibzhii by gifting oshkibinoojiinhyag⁹⁵ with a copper cup. According to Punkin Shananaquet from the Gun Lake Pottawatomi community, this gift signifies our newborns' connection to and intimate relationship with water. Punkin shares that “babies were in that water realm for nine months and it is the water that breaks and cleanses that [path for the] sacred life to come and be part of this mother earth place. That little child should have that cup from the moment of [their] appearance on Earth.”⁹⁶ This physical gift is a reminder of our water teachings—Miskwaabik is the only material that can hold and honour the sacred gift of Nibi.⁹⁷

Gii'igoshimowin. There are several of us simultaneously fasting here at Na Nawe Gwan.⁹⁸ At sunrise and sunset, our songs drift through the maples to each other's ears and hearts. In the darkness of night, nagamonan⁹⁹ bring healing and connection. My circle is away from the others and near moktthewen, my namesake. Their circles are up the hill near ishkode, the central fire. Each of us are here for our own reasons seeking Knowledge, healing, understanding or all three.

Animikii Binesiwag visit throughout the afternoon of our third day. As they approach sounding their voices, I take my miskwaabik akik¹⁰⁰ from my bundle and place it on Aki,¹⁰¹ remembering the teachings of my Elders. Semaa¹⁰² is offered in gratitude and reciprocity—Animikii Binesiyag bring energized Nibi to be gathered and used in Ceremony. Downpour after downpour of gimiwan fill miskwaabik akik, and seep through the seams of my tent floor.

⁹² Abe Sutherland, “Anang Gikendaasowinan miinawaa Nekaanag,” IESS 1001H: Foundations in Indigenous Environmental Studies and Sciences (Class Lecture, Trent University, Peterborough, ON, January 29, 2019).

⁹³ Grandmothers

⁹⁴ Sisters

⁹⁵ Newborn babies; oshkibinoojiinhsag is plural, oskhibinoojiin is singular, literally new child

⁹⁶ Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 336.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ The centre of it all, the centre of the meeting place; near Campbellsport, Wisconsin.

⁹⁹ Songs

¹⁰⁰ Container

¹⁰¹ Refers to the earth, or land, ground

¹⁰² Tobacco

*Gratefully, day four begins clear and hot. I spread my blankets and sleeping bag out over the small trees and bushes of the understory. The heat dries them and my thirst returns. I ignore Nibi waiting in the akik. It is for those who are finishing today to break their fasts.*¹⁰³

Anishinaabekwewag respectfully gather water from mookijiwanibiigoon, ziibiwan, ziibinsan and Zaagiganag in vessels made of Miskwaabik. Nibi for Ceremony is stored and carried in Miskwaabik Akikoog.¹⁰⁴ Also, Miskwaabik Akikoog are placed outside on the ground at the first sound of approaching Animikii Binesiwaag to collect their gift of energized Nibi falling from Gahnoowaaning.

Gahnoowaaning, Animikii Binesiwaag miinwaa Nibi

Nibi transcends and transforms herself throughout the Bodwewaadmii Cosmos. Her transformation is fueled by Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis, who resides in Nangoskwaaning. Nibi flows in liquid form and sometimes accumulates as ice or snow within Mtigwaaning. She forms aankwatoon in, and falls as gimiwan, goon and/or mikwamiikaag¹⁰⁵ from Gahnoowaaning. Gahnoowaaning is the place where the Golden Eagle flies. Gahnoowaaning is also the Cosmic realm of Animikii Binesiwaag, and niwiiwaag noodin,¹⁰⁶ as well as the spiritual realm of kwewag carrying new life.

Animikii Binesiwaag are powerful Nibi Manidoog who cleanse the skies and the land in preparation for the return of Gete Anishinaabeg.¹⁰⁷ Their arrival in either Ziigwaan or Mnookmik¹⁰⁸ is an important and greatly anticipated event in the Anishinaabe seasonal round and is acknowledged by offerings. Majel DeMarsh feasts Animikii Binesiwaag on their return with giigoonh and semaa. Punkin Shananaquet's Nokmis would offer cedar and prayers. Punkin shared this story:

Whenever the Thunders would come, Nana would put cedar on her little woodstove to make the house smell like cedar and burn cedar for the Thunder people. She would listen to the radio and if there was a tornado warning she would burn her cedar, and she'd say, "I do this so those Cloud people, those

¹⁰³ Personal Reflection, Na Nawe Gwan, Nibiin, 2017. First published in my dissertation, modified for this article. Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 330.

¹⁰⁴ Pails, kettles or containers of metal for holding liquids

¹⁰⁵ Hail

¹⁰⁶ The four Winds; niwiiwaag indicates that there are four, noodin is wind, or it is windy

¹⁰⁷ The old ones, Anishinaabe Ancestral Spirits

¹⁰⁸ Ziigwaan is early Spring when the ice and snow is beginning to melt; Mnookmik is Spring, the time when the road gets easier and gentler.

tornadoes, won't come harm us, they will travel around us and won't come be part of their—" she called it their cleansing. She didn't refer to it as a destructive thing, or a life-taking thing. She just said it was a cleansing and that they have to do their work. So, she never talked negative of anything. She always tried to turn it into a positive. When she lit the cedar, it would tell them not to come here and hurt us. They would go around us. We were never worried about it.¹⁰⁹

Stewart King-ban spoke with me about his parents' practices of offering semaa—placing it on the ground at the first sound of approaching thunder to express gratitude for the gift of rain, and the cleansing of the skies and land. They would be asked to avoid damaging the family home or garden as they did their cleansing work. King-ban's family would sit in silence, listening to the voices, stories, and teachings of Animikii Binesiwag as they flew over.¹¹⁰

Gii'igoshimowin. I am alone, surrounded by Manidoog and Nokmisag. Ishkode¹¹¹ burned bright, at naawakwe,¹¹² despite the soggy ground and Nibi dripping from the tree leaves. Smoke rises with my offerings and gratitude. I have been shown many things as night has spiralled into day three times. It is nearly time for my third fire of the day. A quickening wind begins to turn the leaves underside up, yet the sky remains bright blue.

The sound of an approaching vehicle interrupts my solitude, and I leave my fasting circle to meet my supporter. Smiling, he hands me dry blankets. There is concern on his face as he speaks softly of what I've experienced sitting here in this space just upslope of mookijwanibiig. With affirming words, he reminds me I can end my fast before nightfall, the others have finished. Shaking my head, I decline; I have one more sleep here. He gently touches my arm, "You should know we are under a tornado watch." I shake my head again, knowing I will be safe and protected. Returning to my circle, I open the cedar pathway and step inside. As I light ishkode, the sky fills with dark clouds. Semaa, song and prayers follow, and I settle into my tent with the rumble of thunder. Animikii Binesiyag arrive.

Blinding lightning accompanies their ground shaking voices. Nibi streams from the sky, turning the air white as if it is raining milk. Semaa, songs and prayers continue as with the intensity of the storm. I hold my breath and semaa tightly.

¹⁰⁹ Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 381–382.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 359–360.

¹¹¹ Fire

¹¹² Noon

*It is eerily quiet as the storm suddenly ceases. The air is fresh, cleansed and electric. All of Creation sighs, and we return to normal breathing as the slanted rays of a setting sun shines between wet trees. The birds begin to sing, and it's a song different from their usual evening concert. There is an intensity and joy that is uplifting; it sounds as if every bird in existence has surrounded moktthewen and my circle to sing. With nightfall, the bird song quiets and what seems like a chorus of thousands of tree frogs join in this celebration of Nibi, this celebration of life.*¹¹³

Nibi and Nibi Manidoog connect Shkaakmiikwe, Mtigwaaning and Gahnoowaaning. The lightning that flashes from the eyes of Animikii Binesiwag¹¹⁴ energizes the falling rain and thus the land, nurturing and preparing the soil for planting. Rainwater collected in during thunderstorms is used to water seeds, seedlings and our gardens.

Nangoskwaaning, Gokmis D'bik Giizis miinwaa Nibi

Nangoskwaaning, the Starworld, is the third cosmic realm skyward from Shkaakmiikwe. One of our many creation stories share that we and our clans have come from the stars, just as Nibi has. Our water clans are the star gazers and star- and sky-related knowledge holders. Gokmis D'bik Giizis and Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis reside here, along with our Nekaanag,¹¹⁵ Jiibay Miikaan,¹¹⁶ the celestial bodies of Odoodemaking,¹¹⁷ and Waasnoode.¹¹⁸ These sky relatives guide Anishinaabeodziiwin with their physical and spiritual presence. Nekaanag are physical manifestations and symbolic representations of our Nibi-related oral tradition. Seasonal Nekaanag¹¹⁹ remind us of our relationship with

¹¹³ Personal reflection, Na Nawe Gwan, Wisconsin, June 2017. Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 396.

¹¹⁴ David W. Penney and Gerald McMaster, *Before and after the Horizon, Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes*, (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2013), 37; Amy Rosenbrough and BobbieMalone, *Water Panther, Bears and Thunderbirds, Exploring Wisconsin's Effigy Mounds* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2003), 3; Basil Johnston, *Tales the Elders Told, Ojibway Legends* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1981), 40.

¹¹⁵ Constellations. According to Miishikenh Abe Sutherland there is no Anishinaabemowin word that translates to the English word constellation(s). He uses Nekaanag, or relations, to refer to constellations. Anishinaabeg came from the stars and the relationship between individual stars that form images in the sky reflect our clan relationships.

Abe Sutherland, "Anang Gikendaasowinan miinawaa Nekaanag."

¹¹⁶ The Milky Way; also known as Mashkiki Miikaan

¹¹⁷ Our solar system

¹¹⁸ Northern Lights (*aurora borealis*); also known as Waawaate in northern dialects of Anishinaabemowin

¹¹⁹ Seasonal nekaanag are known from the western science perspective as non-circumpolar constellations. These Nekaanag rise above the horizon in the east and set in the west, below the horizon, with the seasons.

Nibi and to live within the seasonal round. A visual image of Michi Shibzhii rises in Nangoskwaanang around Zigwaan to guide us from our winter camps to the sugar bush. Michi Shibzhii's appearance also reminds us that the lake and river ice will soon be unsafe to travel on. Madoodiswan¹²⁰ is visible early spring to late fall during times of Ceremony and fasting. Animikii Binesiwag Nekaanag fills the summer sky accompanied by Animikii Wazison Nekaanag.¹²¹ Both signal the arrival of the Thunderbirds, and the new life of the spring season.¹²²

Gokmis D'bik Giizis and Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis travel from east to west within Nangoskwaanang. Our stories and teachings tell us of the multi-generational kinship relationships between our relatives in Nangoskwaanang and feminine entities and kwewag—when Shkaakmiikwe 'was young, she had a family . . . and was filled with beauty.' The moon is called Grandmother, and the sun Grandfather¹²³ or Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis. Together these celestial entities manifest the duality of day and night.¹²⁴ Gokmis D'bik Giizis is bemnigying,¹²⁵ she was created at the beginning of time to guide the Anishinaabeg.¹²⁶ She is a wise and loving matriarch and teacher, a mother and grandmother—holding us up while raising us and continually watching over both her daughter, Shkaakmiikwe, and countless generations of her grandchildren, the Anishinaabeg.¹²⁷ Gokmis watches in particular over our women,¹²⁸ as well as our men while protecting our children.¹²⁹ In times of darkness she guides men's paths,¹³⁰ "casting the light of knowledge . . . alone, man is backwards and undeveloped. He needs the light that women give him to make him whole."¹³¹

I understand Gokmis D'bik Giizis is a Knowledge Holder because of her lived experience and what she can observe from her position in Nangoskwaanang. Anishinaabe Elder Sherry Copenace agrees, "she can tell you much more than any human being could ... everything you need to know is really with her."¹³² Gokmis teaches all beings to live in balance with

¹²⁰ The Sweat Lodge

¹²¹ Thunderbird's Nest

¹²² Abe Sutherland and Mary Moose, "Anang Gikendaasowinan," First Peoples House of Learning Traditional Teaching (Trent University, Peterborough, ON, January 30, 2019).

¹²³ Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book, The Voice of the Ojibway* (Hayward, WI: Red School House, 1988), 2.

¹²⁴ Wall, "Anishinaabeodziwin," 150.

¹²⁵ Those who hold us up, carry us; also to carry a child and raise them.

¹²⁶ Susan Chiblow, "Relationships and responsibilities between Anishinaabek and Nokomis Giizis (Grandmother Moon inform N'bi (Water) Governance," *Alternative* 2023, 19 no. 2 (2023): 284, <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801231173114>.

¹²⁷ Benton-Banai, *Mishomis*, 18.

¹²⁸ Women, and female-bodied humans

¹²⁹ Benton-Banai, *Mishomis*, 18., and Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 26.

¹³⁰ Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 26.

¹³¹ Benton-Banai, *Mishomis*, 37.

¹³² Chiblow, "Relationships," 288.

and within the seasonal round. Her thirteen annual cycles of guide the growth of our elder relatives, the food and medicine plants, and influence the spawning of fish and birthing cycles of the four-leggeds.¹³³ We, nooshehnsag,¹³⁴ gather Kinoowaabimin¹³⁵ as we observe the relationship between Gokmis D'bik Giizis and our more-than-human relatives. Our survivance is intimately tied to this relationship and our application of the knowledges of when to plant, forage, harvest,¹³⁶ hunt and fish. The twenty-eight-day transformation cycle of Gokmis' phases is sacred and dependant on her relationship with Shkaakmiikwe and Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis. Her many faces reflect these relationships and reveal times of "great power, [Ceremony,] planting, meditating, and fasting."¹³⁷ She first appears as a very thin sliver of a crescent that slowly grows from the right into a half circle. Gokmis' physical presence increases until she reveals her full face. It is at this time when women fulfill their responsibilities¹³⁸ and gather in Ceremony. Gokmis' full face gradually fades to the left forming a half circle and very thin sliver of a crescent before fading to complete darkness. It is at this time of the New Moon when her presence is unseen; she is at her strongest spiritual strength and closest to her partner Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis. This single night in the twenty-eight-day transformation cycle dictates a pause in the work of spiritual workers; it is time to rest and heal, and to renew.¹³⁹ The cycle of Gokmis' phases, and each individual face measures the passing of time. Gokmis teaches us that we as women are an essential part of creation and connected to her through our cycles that coincide with her cycles.¹⁴⁰

The kinship and interconnection between Nibi, Gokmis D'bik Giizis, Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis and the Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabeg is undeniable. Gokmis guides the movement

¹³³ Erin Wayman, "Moonlight shapes how some animals move, grown and even sing," Science News, July 8, 2019. <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/moon-animals-light-behavior-lunar-phases>

¹³⁴ Grandchildren

¹³⁵ Knowledges gained through observation

¹³⁶ Kristiina Vogt, Karen H Beard, Shira Hammann, Jennifer O'Hara Palmiotto, Daniel J Vogt, Frederick N Scatena, and Brooke P Hecht, "Indigenous Knowledge Informing Management of Tropical Forests: The Link between Rhythms in Plant Secondary Chemistry and Lunar Cycles," *Ambio* 31, no. 6 (2002): 485. <https://doi.org/10.1579/0044-7447-31.6.485>; Mere Roberts, F. Weko and L. Clarke, "Maramataka: the Maori Moon Calendar." Research Report No. 283, Matauranga Maori and Bio Protecting Research Team, National Centre for Advance Bio-Protection Technologies, Lincoln University, Canterbury, NZ 2006, <https://researcharchive.lincoln.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/6eb5e823-90ba-4063-b596-100e293fe183/content>

¹³⁷ Benton-Banai, *Mishomis*, 36 -37. Our ancestral relatives, Nekaanag, the seasonal and circumpolar constellations guide seasonal responsibilities also reveal times of great power.

¹³⁸ Chiblow shares research participant Angela Day's comment "Full Moon ceremonies is a responsibility" on page 287, and also quotes Christine Agawa who rationalizes Full Moon ceremonies as a method of "getting back to honouring, recognizing, and acknowledging the work that she [the moon] does for the earth."

Chiblow, "Relationships," 287.

¹³⁹ Stewart King-ban, personal communication.

¹⁴⁰ Chiblow, "Relationships," 287-288.

of Nibi on and within her daughter, influencing the ocean and lake tides. As Gokmis pulls on Nibi and collects her from Shkaakmiikwe, Nibi flows through the umbilical cord of all kwewag.¹⁴¹ These mutual connections to the lakes and oceans and the rhythms of life within our kwewag continually emphasize our essential relationality and remind us of our understanding of ourselves and our reciprocal responsible relationships to land, water, and all of Creation.¹⁴² Gokmis D'bik Giizis' faces reflect the light and energy of Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis. He lights our daily path from east to west pausing only momentarily at the center of the sky to remind the Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabeg to also pause and be in the present, and to gaze around us to see all that we have been given. Mishomis resides, as does Gokmis, in Nangoskwaanang where both influence Nibi. The fire of Mishomis is the fuel that drives the transformative cycle of Nibi within Mtigwaanang and Gahnoowaanang as she changes her physical form from lakes and oceans to fog, clouds, rain, ice, and snow.¹⁴³

Our kinship relationship with Gokmis D'bik Giizis and Mishomis is celebrated and honoured through Manidookewin, or Ceremony.

Manidookewin

*Smoke from burning sage wafts upward from a long-used abalone shell, there is an unmistakable and comforting scent drifting eastward with the wind blowing against my back. The Spirits have joined us—full of gratitude for our presence and offerings—while clear, Sacred Water reflects a blue sky from its vessel of copper. As I lift Nibi to the four directions, singing to her and for her, the voices of the Old Ones echo from within Miskwaabik Akik. They are singing too.*¹⁴⁴

When Gokmis D'bik Giizis is at her strongest physical presence she appears complete – a silver circle shining in the night sky. At this time, the seven kwewag manidoog, our grandmother's helpers who watch over Nibi in Mtigwaanang, ascend into the Skyworld from their earth-bound water-related responsibilities and encircle Gokmis d'bik giizis, dancing around her. Together they hold ceremony. These manidoog bring healing to Nibi and to the kwewag on earth who simultaneously gather in a ceremonial circle. Each circle mirrors the other. We and all life are connected through water. After Ceremony and until

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 287.

¹⁴² Dawn Zinga and Sandra Styres, "Coming Full Circle: Looking to Grandmother Moon," *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation* 36, no. 2 (2013): 313.

¹⁴³ Wall, "Anishinaabeodziwin," 150.

¹⁴⁴ Personal reflection, Ceremony at Catfish Lake, Algonquin Provincial Park. Originally published in my dissertation and adapted for this article. Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 5.

the Gokmis' full face appears again in twenty-eight days, these Nibi Manidoog are lowered back to Mtigwaaning to do their work for the next cycle.

The practice of Full Moon Ceremony is generally consistent across Bodwewaadmiig, yet the details vary with each Ceremony facilitator's teachings and methods. It is my understanding that those holding collective ceremony may include kwewag within nuclear or extended families, and within a wider community. Others hold Ceremony alone as an individual. In the circumstance of Full Moon ceremonies, the sacred fire can be lit and kept by firekeepers of all genders.¹⁴⁵ Punkin Shananaquet spoke with me about the balance of ishkodé¹⁴⁶ and Nibi within the Full Moon Ceremony. She shared that Nibi is the prominent part of that teaching. Nibi is blessed and honored by the presence of Gokmis D'bik Giizis at her utmost physical strength. Gokmis acknowledges Nibi and odeminan¹⁴⁷ that are brought to ceremony. "When we lift that water and bring it back down through those four levels of the Skyworld, it becomes medicine. And it is the same with the berry."¹⁴⁸ Punkin holds Full Moon Ceremony within her community. Her experience at one Ceremony speaks to the depth of learning and knowledge that can be experienced at Ceremony, and its application into our daily lives:

At last night's full moon there was something revealed that I had really never noticed before. I was able to see the relationship within that circle of Full Moon Ceremony participants, the four sacred directions and our path of life as kwewag. New life comes in from waabanoong.¹⁴⁹ In Ceremony you can feel that Spirit of Oshki bemaadizit¹⁵⁰ is there. And then as we travel to Zhaawanoong,¹⁵¹ we experience what it is like to be a young person again. As we make our way to Epgishmok,¹⁵² we as Nokmisag and mothers understand what it is to experience life. And when we look to Giwedinoong,¹⁵³ we see where we are going to be as Nokmisag. And then as we circle back fully to Waabanoong we feel the manidoog are working to show us about life, continuity and continuation. The manidoog also show us that the path of ishkodé is related to Nibi because the sacred water altar is placed there by that Grandfather. As we travel to that path where Nibi and odeminan sit in relationship to ishkodé, and when we place our Spirit there, we are placing our physical-self next to that path of life. We see this relationship and experience

¹⁴⁵ Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 340.

¹⁴⁶ Fire; referred to as Grandfather or Mishomis

¹⁴⁷ Strawberries

¹⁴⁸ Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 342.

¹⁴⁹ The eastern direction

¹⁵⁰ New life

¹⁵¹ The southern direction

¹⁵² The western direction

¹⁵³ The northern direction

these teachings only in Full Moon Ceremony, only one time a month can we experience the feeling of being so close to our path of life.

Gokmis D'bik Giizis looks down on us as her granddaughters and she can feel you, hear you and sense you as well as hear your prayer, and intentions. It is our relationship with Gokmis and how she works with the waters of all the Creation that creates this understanding. Full Moon ceremony is a women's Ceremony because kwewag are givers of life and carriers of the water. Gokmis plays a role in the Nibi teachings, with the life giving of abilities of Nibi. She influences all of Creation in that work that she does each and every month. When she turns her beautiful full face and acknowledges her daughter the Earth, and she acknowledges us as her granddaughters.¹⁵⁴

Kinoomaagewag Nibi Manidoog

Manidookewin is a source of understanding. We make meaning in Ceremony as we experience and understand our place within the spaces of the Cosmos:

The cool dampness of dew seeps through the soles of my moccasins as I quietly walk across the grass to ishkodé blazing brightly in the darkness. Gokmis D'bik Giizis, her full face reflecting off the still water of the bay, casts her light coating zhiingwaak in silver. Biidaaban¹⁵⁵ arrives as we gather in a circle. The eastern sky lightens. Mishomis Shkaabewis Giizis slowly rises in Waabanoong while Gokmis gently descends to the western horizon. The duality of Creation is exposed, horizon to horizon, in the lavender of early morning. Their partnership is palpable. Our grandparents envelope us, in turn we envelope Ishkode miinwaa Nibi. We are complete. We know that we belong.¹⁵⁶

When we realize and acknowledge our place within the Cosmos, we grow in our understanding of relationality and kinship relationships. Shkaakmiikwe is our first mother; we mirror her because we too are made of asinag and Nibi, and we birth and sustain new life. Nibi is our first medicine and teacher, she is the physical manifestation of the energy of life. Nibi flows on and within Shkaakmiikwe while she shares her Knowledges and lived experience. As spirits in human form, we learn to navigate obstacles, to cleanse our bodies and minds, to sing, and to nurture and sustain life through our intimate and infinite relationship with Nibi and her helpers.

¹⁵⁴ Adapted from quote by Punkin Shananaquet in Wall, *It Flows from the Heart: Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabekwewag Nibi Waawiindmowin*, 343.

¹⁵⁵ Daybreak, dawn is coming

¹⁵⁶ Personal reflection of experience at annual Potawatomi Gathering at Wasauksing First Nation, August 2001.

Seven feminine Nibi Manidoog watch over the various sources of water, protecting her and thus our lives and all of life. These manidoog transcend Mtigwaaning, Gahnoowaaning and Nangoskwaaning just as Nibi, herself connects the Cosmic realms. Gokmis D'bik Giizis is our doting grandmother who watches over her daughter, Shkaakmiikwe, and generations of grandchildren, the Bodwewaadmii Anishinaabe. She illuminates Mtigwaaning with her loving silver light, protecting our families. Gokmis pulls on and regulates Nibi's tidal movements of G'chi Zaagiganag and the ocean. The seasonal cycle of Gokmis D'bik Giizis guides our lives here in Mtigwaaning with help from Nekaanag. The cycles of our kwewag coincide with Gokmis' twenty-eight-day transformative cycle—from her strongest spiritual strength during the sole night of darkness to her full physical strength when her face is a silver circle and then back to spiritual strength. Our kwewag mirror and gain knowledge from Gokmis.

About the Author

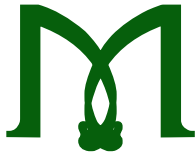
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Water, an Agent of Purification and Life Sustenance: The Relationships of Women with Water in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria

ETIM EKPENYONG MFON

Abstract

In traditional Nigerian societies, women and girls predominantly bear the responsibility of fetching water, reflecting their nurturing roles within families and communities. Water is essential for domestic tasks like cooking, laundry, and child bathing, positioning women as the primary gatherers. Many Nigerian cultures link water with healing, purification, fertility, and life, often involving women in rituals that promote well-being and restore balance. This paper explores the beliefs about women and water among the Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo peoples, three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Over six months, interviews with women from various ages and social statuses provided diverse perspectives on these cultural practices. Key findings reveal the significant roles women play in festivals such as the Osun Festival in Osogbo, the Igue Festival in Benin City, the Ikwe Ezi rites of passage of the Mgbidi communities and the Yemoja Festival in Ibadan, where rituals are centred on rivers and women are pivotal participants. Additionally, in many Nigerian cultures, it is frowned upon for men to perform domestic chores or fetch water, as these tasks are traditionally assigned to



women. The study underscores the central role of women in water-related activities and rituals, emphasizing the need for policies that address the unique challenges women face in accessing water and sanitation.

Keywords: Water Rituals, Igwe Festival, Traditional Nigerian Societies, Osun Festival, Ikwe-Ezi ritual

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Résumé

Dans les sociétés nigérianes traditionnelles, les femmes et les filles assument principalement la responsabilité d'aller chercher de l'eau, ce qui reflète leur rôle nourricier au sein des familles et des communautés. L'eau est essentielle pour les tâches domestiques comme la cuisine, la lessive et le bain des enfants, ce qui positionne les femmes comme les principales collectrices. De nombreuses cultures nigérianes associent l'eau à la guérison, à la purification, à la fertilité et à la vie, impliquant souvent les femmes dans des rituels favorisant le bien-être et rétablissant l'équilibre. Cet article explore les croyances sur les femmes et l'eau parmi les peuples Yoruba, Edo et Igbo, trois principaux groupes ethniques du Nigéria. Pendant six mois, des entretiens avec des femmes d'âges et de statuts sociaux variés ont fourni diverses perspectives sur ces pratiques culturelles. Les principales conclusions révèlent le rôle important que jouent les femmes dans des festivals tels que le festival Osun à Osogbo, le festival Igwe à Benin City, les rites de passage Ikwe Ezi des communautés Mgbidi et le festival Yemoja à Ibadan, où les rituels sont centrés sur les rivières et où les femmes sont des participantes essentielles. De plus, dans de nombreuses cultures nigérianes, il est mal vu que les hommes effectuent des tâches domestiques ou vont chercher de l'eau, car ces tâches sont traditionnellement confiées aux femmes. L'étude souligne le rôle central des femmes dans les activités et les rituels liés à l'eau, soulignant la nécessité de politiques qui répondent aux défis uniques auxquels les femmes sont confrontées pour accéder à l'eau et à l'assainissement.

Mots-clés : Rituels de l'eau, Festival Igwe, Sociétés traditionnelles nigérianes, Festival Osun, Ikwe-Ezi

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Introduction

Water, one of the four elements of the earth, constitutes about seventy-one percent of the Earth's surface and is a vital force upon which all life depends for sustenance. According to the song of Fela Anikolapo Kuti (1975), "water has no enemy." Chief Mrs. Akomolafe Clara (2023) corroborates this, stating that water is particularly significant to women: "We come in contact with water on a daily basis, making it available for bathing, drinking, and various other uses. Moreover, we use water more than men." An article published by the World Health Organization (2023) validates that women and girls have specific hygiene needs, emphasizing the necessity of clean, functional, lockable, gender-segregated spaces with access to sanitary products and disposal systems. Failing to meet these needs jeopardizes the 2030 Agenda, as access to water and sanitation are human rights. When women and girls are deprived of these rights, their health, educational and economic opportunities, and societal roles are profoundly affected.

In many traditional Nigerian societies, the task of fetching water falls primarily on women and girls. This responsibility symbolizes women's nurturing and caretaking roles within their families and communities. Water is essential to most domestic chores—from cooking, laundry, and dishwashing to house cleaning and bathing children. Consequently, women can be considered the primary water gatherers. Moreover, in many Nigerian cultures, water is believed to possess healing properties, and women may be associated with water rituals related to cleansing, purification, and spiritual healing. They may perform rituals using water to promote well-being and restore balance in individuals or communities. Water is also seen as a symbol of fertility, life, and purification. As the bearers of life, women are often associated with water and its life-giving properties, thus regarded as the nurturers and sustainers of their communities.

This research deals with the Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo peoples - the three major ethnic groups of Nigeria, mainly located in the southwestern, south-south, and southeastern parts of the country, respectively. Each group is identified by its unique language and culture. The Yoruba people are mainly situated in the southwestern part of the country and speak Yoruba as their major language, followed by English. They are known for their rich cultural practices, including traditional festivals, intricate beadwork, and vibrant drumming traditions, which play central roles in their social and spiritual lives. The Yoruba kinship system is patrilineal, but it emphasizes both immediate and extended family networks, which influence inheritance patterns, marriage alliances, and social responsibilities.

The people who generally come from the south-south region speak the Edo language, with the involvement of other dialects. Their cultural identity is very much enveloped in the former Benin Kingdom, renowned for its complex bronze work and traditional

monarchy, as noted by Bradbury. The Edo people also follow a patrilineal kinship system where extended family and lineage groups feature dominantly in the self-government and decision-making processes at large. Traditional ceremonies and cultural symbols, such as coral beads and ceremonial swords, help to bring out their long-standing culture. The Igbo people, mainly in the southeastern region, use the Igbo language, though English is a common secondary language. The Igbo are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and vast cultural heritage, which include masquerade festivals, kola nut traditions, and symbolic art forms. Their patrilineal kinship system similarly underscores the importance of extended families in social organization, inheritance, and communal decision-making. These communities and this research project are described in greater detail below.

The paper is designed to examine the dynamics of such activities among the three ethnic groups, highlighting female involvement in water activities and their cultural significance. In these societies, women are typically involved in water collection, purification, and distribution - an important factor in the larger framework of sustaining families and communities. The ethnographic research was done over a period of six months in the Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo communities, making in-depth studies of water-related roles of women possible. Women of different ages and social status were interviewed using a purposive sampling method to have a fair representation of their interactions with water. It had to be this way because such an approach ensured the best mixture of perspectives, allowing ethnographic data of diverse experience and rich insights into experiences. Physically and through social networking sites, interviews were made with the subjects as their preferences dictated, making access as easy as possible. A dual approach like this enabled participation from a wider demographic of women, and gave weight to the depth of findings. The use of the social media platforms during research also resolved some logistical obstacles and expanded the reach of the study.



Plate 1: *From the Stream* is composed of three stylized female figures returning from the stream bearing earthenware full of water on their heads. It depicts diligence and commitment even in the face of adversity.

Title: *From the Stream*
Artist: Etim Ekpenyong
Medium: Etimpaste (an alternative water-soluble painting medium) and pen on paper
Year: 2023

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2023 study on how women and girls bear the brunt of the water and sanitation crisis. WHO reports that globally, women are most likely to be responsible for fetching water for households, while girls are nearly twice as likely as boys to bear the responsibility, and spend more time doing it each day. The report states further that insufficient or inadequate laundry and sanitation facilities increase health risks for women and girls, making it more difficult for them to manage their periods safely and privately. It is common for women and adolescents in poor households, as well as those with disabilities, to lack a private washroom or changing area. Despite water scarcity in many parts of the world, both WHO's study and this research conclude that women and girls are primarily responsible for providing water to the household even in times of scarcity.

However, the present research also includes the spiritual roles women and girls play in their communities involving the use of water (such as water sacrifices). The WHO study focuses more closely on the burden on women and girls, who bear the brunt of gathering water, and the sanitation crises that arise from water scarcity.

Geographical Location and Details of the Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo Peoples

The Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo peoples occupy separate but ecologically congruent parts of Nigeria, which, again, have particular geographical characteristics that contribute to defining their life patterns.

The Yoruba are mostly found in the southwestern part of the nation, comprising states such as Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti. The region has a tropical climate, with wet and dry seasons, and is characterized by rich soils suitable for crops such as yams, maize, and cocoa. According to Nigerian historian Isaac Adeagbo Akinjobin (1980), the Yoruba people's location near the Atlantic Ocean made maritime trade possible in the past, as it was based on a varied topography encompassing coastal wetlands and savannahs that enabled both farming and cultural activities. Rivers like the Osun and Ogun feature in the spiritual and material lives of the Yoruba, reflecting in festivals and ceremonies, one of which is the well-known Osun-Osogbo Festival.

The Edo are mainly in the south-south region, and their homeland is, essentially, the Edo State. The area is tropical; there is heavy rainfall, good vegetation, and productive soil that supports a rainforest as well as crops such as yams, oil palm, and rubber plants (Bradbury 1973). The Edo people have been very significant to the commercial and cultural history of Nigeria in pre-colonial and colonial eras, due to the location of Benin City on Benin River. Other prominent rivers in this region include the Ikpoba and Ovia, serving both agricultural and cultural needs, while the fertility of the land itself ensures that an agricultural economy is intensive in the region. The cultural importance of land and rivers is reflected within a thanksgiving ritual known as the Igwe Festival, marking land renewal and spiritual rejuvenation for the monarchy.

The Igbo people are mainly located in the southeastern part of the country, comprising what is now known as the states of Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Abia. (Smith, 2020). This area is characterized by a tropical climate with wet and dry seasons, and the soil supports crops such as yams, cassava, and plantains (Nwosu, 2019). On its western edge, the southeastern region has the Niger River, and to the east, the Cross River, both of which further helped trade and cultural exchange with other groups in the area (Ekechi, 1972). The region is characterized by a rolling landscape, fertile plains, and forests; these dictate settlement patterns, farming, and cultural life. From both a spiritual and practical viewpoint, rivers and streams hold very important positions in shaping the Igbo people's

relations with their natural environment (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

The Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo peoples, although distant from one another geographically, are each very close to nature, which forms the basis of their agricultural economies, social structures, and cultural expressions. It is in the interplay between climate, topography, and cultural practices that one observes the centrality of geography in shaping their distinct yet interconnected ways of life.

Primary and Secondary Languages

Each of these ethnic groups speaks their own language (Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo, respectively) and all of these languages belong to the Niger-Congo language family. They are indigenous to southwestern, south-south, and southeastern Nigeria (Smith, 2020). The Yoruba language is a tonal language with an enriched oral tradition of proverbs, poetry, and traditional songs. It is very widely spoken across Yoruba-speaking states and is, thus, an important part of the cultural identity and communication mechanism in everyday life, spiritual activities, and social customs (Akinjobin 1980). Likewise, the Edo language is central in the cultural life of the Edo people, representing their culture through its use in a number of traditional rituals, festivals, and forms of oral literature, such as folk tales and historical stories (Bradbury, 1973). Igbo has a rich tonal character and great dialectal variation, with myriads of local dialects spoken throughout the Igbo-speaking areas. It plays an important role in maintaining the Igbo people's cultural heritage and is used during traditional ceremonies, in oral literature, and community interactions (Ekechi, 1972).

The Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo people have their indigenous languages, but English is an important second language, as it is the official language of Nigeria and used as a medium of instruction in schools (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). In fact, English has been used in government administration, business transactions, court litigation, and inter-ethnic interactions, promoting national unity and opening them to the international community (Smith, 2020). The use of English alongside Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo fosters bilingualism, enabling these communities to navigate traditional and modern aspects of Nigerian society (Nwosu, 2019). This linguistic duality underscores the dynamic engagement of these ethnic groups with their cultural roots while embracing broader socioeconomic and educational opportunities.

Population

In 2025, Nigeria's population is estimated to be 236,747,130 people (CIA Worldbook, 2025). The Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo peoples are among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, each contributing significantly to the nation's cultural and social landscape. There are

approximately 49.35 million Yoruba, around twenty-one percent of Nigeria's population, making them one of the largest ethnic groups in the country. Meanwhile, approx. eighteen percent of Nigerians identify as Igbo, around 42.3 million people. (World Atlas, 2024) There are estimated to be around 30 million Edo speakers, concentrated around Benin City. (Foreign Affairs Nigeria). Each of these cultures have distinct identities and significant roles in the nation's socio-economic framework.

Kinship System and Social Organization

While the kinship systems of the Igbo, Yoruba, and Edo peoples are distinctive, they share common features: there is an emphasis on extended family structures that play a significant role in social organization and community cohesion. The Igbo kinship system is predominantly patrilineal, meaning lineage and inheritance are traced through the male line (Ekechi, 1972). Igbo extended families are integral to communal decision-making processes and the formation of support networks. According to Onwuejeogwu (1981), these extended families provide a framework for social obligation, inheritance, and the performance of traditional rituals. The kinship system influences marriage practices and social responsibilities; these pillars maintain their cultural heritage intact, which, in turn, is the basis for the coherent and supportive Igbo community structure (Chukwu, 2018).

While the kinship system among the Yoruba is also largely patrilineal, both patrilineal and matrilineal systems may be seen, particularly in the inheritance of some titles and positions in the community. The Yoruba maintain an intricate system of titles and age grades that are essential in their social and political life. Respect for elders and a hierarchical family structure in Yoruba communities are expressed through respect, social interaction, marital relations, and communal rituals, while members of individual Yoruba families usually live in close proximity to one another and provide mutual assistance (Smith, 2019).

The Edo kinship organization, as among the Yoruba and Igbo, is patrilineal. Family lineage and royal connections in Edo are central to social organization, which is more or less arranged through the royal family and their extended family. This elite has an important role in decision-making processes and maintaining the cultural values of their community (Bradbury, 1973).

Time Frame of the Research

The research was conducted over a six-month period, from May 2023 to November 2023. This time frame was selected to allow for thorough observations and interactions within various Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo communities, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of water-related practices and their cultural significance across these groups. The extended

period also facilitated the establishment of rapport with participants and the collection of detailed ethnographic data through sustained fieldwork, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the diverse ways in which water is integrated into the daily lives, rituals, and traditions of Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo women.

Selection Criteria and Demographic Details of Interviewees

Interviewees were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives across Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo communities. Criteria included age, social status, and involvement in water-related activities. The sample comprised women from different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds, ranging from young adults to elderly women, to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and roles related to water in each ethnic group. This demographic diversity was intended to provide a well-rounded view of how water interacts with various aspects of life in Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo communities, reflecting the unique cultural and social contexts of each group.

Plate 2: *Laundry at the Stream* is composed of two stylized female figures doing the laundry at a stream. Like the painting in Plate 1, above, this painting also depicts diligence and commitment.

Title: *Laundry at the Stream*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper

Year: 2023



Daily Interactions with Water

Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo women engage with water in multifaceted ways that reflect its central role in their daily lives and cultural practices. From dawn to dusk, water is integral to a variety of domestic and communal activities. In rural settings, women typically begin their day by fetching water from local wells, rivers, or streams. This task is often

performed collectively with other women, fostering social bonds and facilitating the exchange of news and community updates (Chukwu, 2018). The process of fetching water involves significant physical labor, as women carry heavy containers over long distances, highlighting their pivotal role in managing household water resources (Smith, 2020). This practice is common among the Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo peoples, emphasizing water's significance as a shared resource and a means of social cohesion.



Plate 3: *Multi-task* is the surrealistic rendition of a woman who is effortlessly multitasking her water-based domestic chores.

Title: *Multi-task*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong.

Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper

Year: 2023

Gender has no bearing on how the water is used, nor the volume. Instead, water usage depends on a number of variables, including lifestyle, habits, household size, location, and cultural customs. Water is used by both men and women for basic daily tasks like drinking and personal hygiene. However, in these traditional Nigerian cultures, the responsibility for making this essential element available to the rest of the family rests primarily on the shoulders of women. Moreover, in a chauvinistic society such as that of Nigeria (and some other parts of the world), domestic activities that involve the use of water, such as

cooking, laundry, dishwashing, scrubbing the floor, bathing children, etc., are assigned to women as a gender. Ahmed (2021) states that the needs of production are also included in women's water usage (agriculture, micro-business, and aquaculture). She further states that water quality and secure wastewater disposal are just as crucial as accessibility, and that, typically, girls in South Asia and in many regions of Africa spend more time fetching water and doing other domestic chores compared to their brothers.

Plate 4: *Homemaker* is created in the surrealistic sphere; it is composed of a stylized female figure with her head embedded in earthenware from which water gushes upon some apples. She is a source of life—an agent of hope for a healthy living, not just to her family members but also to her community.

Title: *Homemaker*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

Medium: Etimpaste and charcoal on canvas

Year: 2023



Domestic water usage is extensive, for Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo women as for others. In the kitchen, it is used for cooking staple foods such as yams and cassava, which are essential to the cuisines of these groups (Nwosu, 2019). Water is also central to laundry, with women washing clothes, bed linens, and other textiles frequently. Bathing is a daily ritual for personal hygiene and often involves using water sourced from local bodies or wells (Ekechi, 1972). For drinking, water is sourced from the same wells or streams, with purification methods varying depending on local practices and available resources. These

daily activities underscore dependence on and management of water in maintaining household and personal health (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

Udoka Onochie a trader in Asaba, Delta State (2024) states that in traditional Igbo communities, women are responsible for domestic chores, such as providing water for the family, cooking, and washing. He further stresses that the kitchen is assumed to be women's department. Udoka explains that "during festive periods such as this, we only help the women to slaughter the goats to be used for the New Year celebration, they can take it up from there."

Plate 5: *Water Gatherers* is composed of two stylized female figures bearing earthenware containing water on their heads. There are two other pieces of earthenware floating on the river beside them. This piece depicts industriousness and the willingness to continue to live up to one's responsibilities, even when it is inconvenient.

Title: *Water Gatherers*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper

Year: 2023



Amaka Ezekiel (2023), who runs a catering business in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, laments that her father would be very upset with her mother if he were to find that his sons were engaged in domestic chores such as cooking and laundry. She states that her father would always say that a man's place is not in the kitchen; he should strive to provide financially for his family. Her father was a businessman who sold office furniture; he had two outlets, one in Asaba (where the family resided), and the other in the heart of Onitsha. Amaka states that "I am the first of five children, and the only daughter. It was the responsibility of my mother and I to do the cooking and watching,

while my brothers help out in my father's furniture business. My father would emphasize that any man found in the kitchen cooking is a very useless person -- domestic chores are for women and girls."



Plate 6: *Ada Igbo fetching water* is a photograph, where the maiden is fetching water from the river and pouring it into her earthen pot

Title: *Ada Igbo fetching water*

Photographer: Adaeze Nwa'Nsukka

Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ada_igbo_fetching_water.jpg

Year: 2022

Challenges of Accessing Potable Water

Accessing potable water in some parts of Nigeria (especially the rural areas) can sometimes be a daunting challenge due to the lack of adequate pipe born water; consequently, going to the stream to fetch water multiple times per day can be a very stressful experience, especially when one's place of residence is not in close proximity to the stream. In some rural communities in Nigeria, a borehole is not available; even in those communities where boreholes have been sunk, some women and girls may have to walk for over eight hundred metres to fetch water for their different families multiple times per day. This takes a toll on their health and, sometimes, their educational pursuits.

For those communities that depend solely on streams or rivers for their source of water, they may have to trek for over three kilometres or more to access potable water.



Plate 7: *Mother Care* is a surrealist rendition composed of a woman bathing her child at the river; there are four pieces of earthenware in the background from which water flows. The mother bears on her back a pot of water like a baby; this depicts how precious water is to her and her household: she depends on this element to effectively take good care of her family.

Title: *Mother Care*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper

Year: 2023

Aside from the health hazards posed by long and regular walking bearing a heavy container of water, there is also danger from sexual harassment and gender-based violence that may occur on the lonely pathway to and from the source. Ahmed (2021) maintains that gathering water can be a potentially fatal task for women and girls, as the likelihood of gender-based violence is very high for women and girls.



Plate 8: *Restrictions* is created as the surrealistic composition of two female figures in distress; their distress is due to their journeys to the stream being fraught with danger. There are rapists among the reeds who lie in wait to carry out their evil enterprise.

Title: *Restrictions*
Artist: Etim Ekpenyong
Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper
Year: 2023

Nkechi Anastasia Egbuka (2023), a 35-year-old school teacher from Imo State, recalls how, back in the village, she and her friends would only go to the stream to fetch water when their fathers and brothers were going to the farm just to avoid being sexually harassed by unscrupulous elements from neighbouring communities. She further states that: “we would go in group, in the company of both our fathers and brothers who were going to the farm, or some of our mothers would accompany us to the stream, because there have been cases of sexual harassment of which the culprits (most of whom were from neighbouring communities) denied ever perpetuating such a crime. Subsequently, to avoid being harassed or even raped, we never went to fetch water at the stream without the company of either our brothers and fathers, or our mothers.”

Symbolic and Spiritual Significance of Water

Beyond domestic use, water has great cultural and spiritual significance in Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo cultures and women are significant participants in many community services and rituals that involve water. In the Yoruba culture, for example, women participate in river rituals, such as those held at Osun River; this river is said to be the abode of the goddess Osun, a goddess of fertility, healing, and prosperity. Rituals usually involve offerings, prayers, and/or libations for favourable considerations from the gods or ancestors. Among the Igbo people, preparation of ritual waters employed during ceremonial cleaning and

purification rites, commonly held in community festivals, falls into the hands of women. These rites and rituals are usually done in certain streams or rivers that they regard as sacred; they, too, communicate with the ancestors or gods with these practices. Water features in traditional ceremonies among the Edo-speaking people, too: during the Igwe Festival, for example, women take the lead various water-related rituals of purification and renewal for communal prosperity and harmony. In these cultures, women regularly take part in community-wide water-related rites during important events like traditional rites of passage, fertility celebrations, or agricultural festivals. These practices highlight the deep cultural and spiritual connections between water and communal life in Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo societies (Agbaje, 2021).

In the mythologies of the Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo, water is filled with deep symbolic and spiritual meaning, often related to fertility, purification, and life-giving properties. As in the case of the Osun River mentioned above, rivers, streams, and other bodies of water are considered as being filled with spirits, deities, and/or ancestral spirits that preside over the fortunes of all aspects of life. In Yoruba cosmology, water is personified by powerful deities such as Osun, who is celebrated through festivals and rituals at her sacred rivers.

In Igbo spirituality, meanwhile, water is such an intense force linked with the spiritual realm that it serves as a medium through which one can communicate with the divine and one's ancestors. The river goddess Idemili is a central figure in Igbo mythology; she is believed to bring prosperity and balance to her people. Water-related rituals including libations and offerings are performed to appease Idemili and other water spirits, for the harmony and well-being of the community.

Plate 9: *Oral Narrative* is a surrealist piece that is composed of two stylized female figures: a mother and daughter whose heads are made of decorated calabashes. The mother is emptying her calabash of water into that of her daughter; in other words, the mother is transferring knowledge of the old ways to her daughter.

Title: *Oral Narrative*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

Medium: Etimpaste and charcoal on canvas

Year: 2023



Similarly, in Edo communities, women play key roles in ceremonies dedicated to Olokun, the god of the sea, who symbolizes wealth, fertility, and spiritual depth. These rituals, often performed at water bodies or sacred sites, involve offerings and prayers to ensure prosperity and balance within the community. Across these three cultures, women's involvement in water-related spiritual practices underscores their critical role in maintaining the spiritual and communal health of their societies, reflecting their profound connection to the symbolic and practical aspects of water.



Plate 10: *A Sacred Affair* is composed of three stylized female figures in the river bearing decorated calabashes in their hand which contain sacrificial items; they are dressed in white wrappers. Their hairdo is elaborate and their ears, necks, and wrists are adorned with coral beads. These women are performing water sacrifice on behalf of their community.

Title: *A Sacred Affair*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper

Year: 2023

Water sacrifice is a specific concept or practice that involves making sacrifices or offerings using water. Women who are priestesses or devotees of the voodoo tradition conduct water sacrifices along sacred rivers, streams, and wells by throwing foods, drinks, flowers, and other symbolic objects into the water which is then purified. Rituals may include prayers, chants, dance, and ritual offerings to honor and communicate with river spirits and deities, seeking their blessings and protection.

Four Case Studies

(1) *The Osun Festival and the Roles of the Arugbá*

The Osun Osogbo Festival, held in the final week of August, is a significant Yoruba cultural event that celebrates the river deity Oshun. Thousands of pilgrims and devotees from across Nigeria converge at the Osogbo Sacred Forest to partake in this vibrant festival. The event is marked by various rituals, sacrifices, and offerings made by priests to seek Oshun's protection and blessings for the coming year (Osun Osogbo Album, 2023). The festival highlights the deep spiritual connection the Yoruba people maintain with their deities and the natural elements that symbolize these divine forces. The celebrations feature elaborate processions, traditional music, dance, and the convergence of worshippers in a communal act of reverence to the goddess Oshun.



Plate 11: *Arugbá* is a stylized rendition of the Arugbá as she makes her way to the Osun River to perform her role in the Osun Festival.

Title: *Arugbá*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong.

Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper

Year: 2023

Bruce (2014) expounds that central to the Osun Osogbo Festival is the Arugbá, a young virgin girl chosen from the king's extended family to play a pivotal role. Epitomizing purity, she is considered the living vessel of the river goddess Oshun. Her primary duty during the

festival is to carry a sacred calabash filled with sacrifices and offerings. This calabash is crucial for the traditional rites, as it is believed that the purity of the Arugbá ensures the acceptance of these offerings by Oshun.

Bankole Idowu (2023) explains that in the month leading up to the festival, the Arugbá lives in seclusion, preparing for her sacred role. During the height of the festival, she leads a procession to the sacred grove, symbolizing the community's collective devotion and hope for blessings. Her role underscores the festival's themes of purity, spiritual intercession, and the renewal of the bond between the community and the divine. (Twinkle 2023)

(2) *The Rite of Passage of Ikwe-ezi in Mgbidi of Imo State*

The Ikwe-ezi is a traditional rite of passage in Mgbidi, Imo State, which is an important cultural practice among the Igbo people. This rite marks the transition from childhood to adulthood and is significant for both the individual and the community. In many traditional Igbo rites of passage, water plays a significant role due to its symbolic association with purification, life, and spiritual cleansing. For the Ikwe-ezi rite of passage in Mgbidi, Imo State, the involvement of water, particularly in rituals involving girls, often includes visits to a stream called *Nmirin wataoma*. The girls are required to perform this ritual nude; they visit and dip their feet into the water, after which they visit the shrine of Obana, the goddess of the river.

Plate 12: *Water Rituals* features a stylized dancing, naked female figure at the riverside. Her head is a decorated calabash; her neck, wrists, waist, and ankles are adorned with coral beads. In the background are three decorated calabashes. This painting seeks to portray that part of a rite of passage requiring participants to strip nude in order to perform a ritual at the river.

Title: *Water Rituals*
Artist: Etim Ekpenyong
Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper
Year: 2023



Chief Festus Achonu, Principal Palace Secretary to the traditional ruler of Mgbidi Imo State, explains that as part of the ritual, every girl participating is expected go to a river called *Nmirin wataoma* (water of a beautiful child) bearing in hand a small yam to throw inside the shrine. This act means she has performed the Ikwe-ezi ceremony, signifying that she has been purified. This water ritual is a crucial part of the Ikwe-ezi rite, emphasizing the importance of purity, renewal, and the connection to nature and ancestral spirits. It serves to spiritually and physically prepare the girls for their new responsibilities and roles within the community. Any girl that is of age to perform the Ikwe-ezi but refuses to do so becomes an outcast; her family will be excommunicated: they will be officially excluded from participating in the religious community they belong to.

(3) *Igue Festival, Benin City*

During the Igue Festival in Benin City, Edo State, women play a crucial role in rituals at a sacred stream or river such as Ikpoba River and the Ovia River, which aim to ensure the land's fertility, abundance, and security. Dressed in traditional attire, they gather near the water source and participate in singing, dancing, and ritual drinking. Led by the *lyoba*, female spiritual leaders who invoke ancestral spirits and gods and offer sacrifices, the women use ceremonial objects like clay pots, calabashes, and everyday utensils, along with jewelry and plants believed to possess spiritual properties, to carry out these significant rites. It is believed that as the women perform the ceremonies alongside a stream or river, the water acts as a channel for communication with the supernatural world. The rituals are conducted seriously and with devotion, as they are seen as a way to maintain harmony between the forces of nature, society, and the divine.

In addition to serving as a cultural celebration, the Igue Festival, with its rites led by women near streams or rivers, is crucial to preserving the traditions and heritage of the Benin people. It highlights the importance of women in the spiritual and social fabric of the community and exemplifies how crucial they are to maintaining the wealth and prosperity of the kingdom.

(4) *Uzoro festival of Akoko-Edo*

Plate 13: Photograph of the Uzoro festival

Source:

<https://www.thehopenewspaper.com/traditional-festivals-in-akoko-edo-celebrating-womanhood-during-uzoro-festival/>

Retrieved: 6 March 2025



Tony Momodu (2024) of *The Hope Newspaper* reports on the Uzoro festival, which is held annually in Akoko-Edo, a local government area of Edo State. It takes its name from the story of a childless woman who, after many years of marriage, who sort out divine intervention and performed the traditional betrothing of suitors, revolves around this story. In this story, Uzoro River is used as the central source of water supply throughout the whole community. This childless, forlorn woman was so desperate for a child one day that she went down to the river to fetch some water. She went to the gods of the river then and made a serious promise that if the Uzoro River granted her request for a child, she would definitely come back to thank the gods. To that end, after nine months and the delivery of the woman, she revealed the vow to the elders in that community and set out to fulfill it. She, accompanied by her family and other people from her community, returned to the Uzoro River with offerings such as "Elozo"-a bean cake traditionally prepared-as an act of keeping her promise. Her story inspired other women in the community who were childless to embark on similar actions which the Uzoro River also answered in the affirmative. This event gave a spiritual significance to the river and subsequently led to the establishment of the communal "Uzoro Festival," which celebrated this sacred tradition, although its focus eventually shifted beyond barren women.

Local Adesuwa Egharevba (2025) relates how the Uzoro festival is often performed with local drummers, dances recreating tales of the ancients, and appearances by different masked representatives of ancestral spirits. These add up to create an event aimed at portraying oneness, thankful harvests, and transferring culturally founded values to succeeding generations. She elaborates that it is on this basis that "the visit by our women to the river is often an act of great spiritual significance, where they perform some sort of cleansing rites, offering prayers or sacrifices for blessings, purification, and prosperity for their individual families and society. The river holds symbolic importance as a sacred site in the festival."

Discussion

This research indicates a complex role of water both in mundane and spiritual matters among Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo women. Since water is important in a variety of domestic activities, such as cooking, laundry, and personal hygiene, it means that it is crucial to maintaining the daily household routine across these cultural groups. Water-related responsibilities remain an obligation of women from across these three cultures, emphasizing their role as custodians of domestic and ritual use of water.

In Yoruba society, water plays an important role in religious rites, such as in the worship of Osun, where women are primarily involved in purification and fertility rites at sacred

rivers. Among the Igbo, women are highly active in community rituals and ceremonies involving water, such as cleansing rites and festivals dedicated to gods like Idemili, underscoring its symbolic and practical importance. Among the Edo, women play important roles in water-related rituals dedicated to gods like Olokun, god of the sea. These ceremonies, often carried out on riverbanks or sacred groves, highlight the importance of water for prosperity, fertility, and spiritual balance.

Interpretation of Results in the Context of Existing Literature

The findings are consistent with the literature on the symbolic and utilitarian value of water in traditional African societies such as the Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo. Indeed, other studies have pointed out that water is associated with fertility, purification, and life-giving forces across these cultures. This study brings forward that women among the Yoruba are important in water-related rituals, including those performed for the river goddess Osun, one of the deities for fertility and healing. It highlights that Igbo women are central in regard to water-related ceremonies and purification and fertility rites related to deities like Idemili, displaying deep involvement in cultural and spiritual practices. This research corroborates the significant contribution that Edo women make in the religious rites to Olokun, the sea deity who regulates wealth, fertility, and spiritual equilibrium, as well as women's valuable social role in sustaining social harmony and prosperity in their community.

On a larger scale, it advances the idea that water serves as an integral agent in women's everyday and ritual lives from Yoruba through to Igbo to Edo societies – all across the southern provinces of Nigeria. The finding is further supported by ethnographic research studies carried out among African communities, which record water's dual symbolic and practical meaning in maintaining cultural identity and spiritual well-being.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this research contributes to the understanding of the intersection between gender, water, and spirituality in Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo cultures, offering insights into how water functions as a symbolic and practical resource in shaping social roles and practices. In Yoruba society, water plays a vital role in rituals dedicated to Osun, symbolizing fertility, healing, and communal harmony. Similarly, in Igbo culture, water is central to ceremonies linked to deities like Idemili, embodying purification and life-giving properties, while in Edo culture, the reverence for water is evident in rituals honoring Olokun, the sea deity associated with prosperity and spiritual depth. These findings underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of how gendered responsibilities and spiritual beliefs intersect with environmental resources across these cultural groups.

Practically, the findings have implications for water management and community development initiatives, suggesting that policies and programs should consider the cultural and gender-specific roles associated with water to be more effective. By acknowledging the centrality of water in the daily and ritual lives of Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo women, and its profound symbolic importance, stakeholders can better address the needs and contributions of women in water resource management and cultural preservation efforts. Incorporating these cultural insights into policy frameworks would ensure sustainable and inclusive approaches to community development.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the impact of modern changes on traditional water practices and the evolving roles of women in contemporary Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo societies. Investigating the effects of globalization and urbanization on traditional water-related rituals and domestic responsibilities across these cultures could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural change. For instance, examining how Yoruba rituals honoring Osun adapt to urban settings, how Igbo purification rites involving Idemili are sustained in modern communities, and how Edo ceremonies dedicated to Olokun evolve amidst societal shifts would enrich our understanding of these transitions.

Additionally, comparative studies involving other ethnic groups in Nigeria or across different African cultures could offer a broader perspective on how water functions within various societal contexts. Such studies could contribute to the development of culturally informed water management strategies that respect and integrate the unique cultural values and practices of Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, and other ethnic communities. These efforts would foster sustainable development while preserving the cultural heritage tied to water across diverse African societies.

Conclusion

The present research places water as an integral part of daily activities and cultural practices among Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo women. Key findings indicate that water is integral to a variety of domestic activities, such as cooking, laundry, and personal hygiene, thus maintaining its essential place within the daily household functions in the given cultures. The study further emphasizes women's active participation in communal rituals and ceremonies that deal with water. In the case of Yoruba women, for example, water is the central factor in fertility and healing rituals. Among Igbo women, water is a means of spiritual connection during purification rites and fertility festivals of deities. Similarly, Edo women play a major role in ceremonies regarding Olokun, the sea god of prosperity and balance.

The research verifies that water is a responsibility taken up by women across the three cultures (men may be actively discouraged), thus confirming their position as custodians of domestic and ritualistic use of water in their respective communities. These findings also confirm the indispensable contribution of Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo women to sustaining the cultural, spiritual, and practical dimensions of water within their societies.



Plate 14: *Homebuilders* is composed of three stylized female figures whose heads are made of clay pots, and three other water vessels made from terracotta. Clay pots stores cool water that not only quench thirst but also nourishes the body and soul. Thus, the clay-pot heads of these women depict hospitality, levelheadedness and sound mind: they are homebuilders.

Title: *Homebuilders*
Artist: Etim Ekpenyong
Medium: Etimpaste and pen on paper
Year: 2023

About the Author / Artist

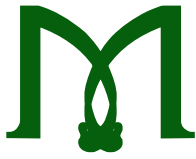
Etim Ekpenyong Mfon, PhD, teaches painting, drawing and art history in the Department of Fine Art, Yaba College of Technology, Nigeria. A member of the Art Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) and Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), Etim has published in several international and local journals.

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Women and Rainfall: An Eco-ritual Among the Alps of the Past

DARIO BASSI

Abstract

This paper focuses on a 'legendary' ritual that took place in the 19th century near the church of San Salvatore in Albosaggia, a small village in Valtellina, an Alpine valley in northern Italy. The rite in question comprised the immersion of human skulls in order to attract and repel rainwater according to the needs of the moment. The ritual is analyzed through the recovery and problematization of a heterogeneous corpus of sources attesting to its historicity. A hypothesis is then proposed on the connections between water, the dead and the feminine that underpin them. Thus, the study proposes the adoption of the term 'eco-ritual' to encapsulate this phenomenon. In doing so, a culturally distinctive form of female agency is displayed: the symbolic power to influence the water cycle, which is at the same time an ontological and economic vivifying force.

Keywords: eco-ritual, female agency, Italy, Alps, matriculture

* * * * *



Sommario

Il presente contributo si concentra su un rituale “leggendario” che si svolgeva nel XIX secolo nei pressi della chiesa di San Salvatore ad Albosaggia, un piccolo paese situato in Valtellina, una valle alpina dell'Italia settentrionale. Il rituale in questione consisteva nell'immersione di teschi umani per evocare e respingere l'acqua piovana sulla base dei bisogni del momento. Il rituale viene analizzato attraverso il recupero e la problematizzazione di un corpus eterogeneo di fonti che ne attestano la storicità. Viene quindi avanzata una lettura sulle possibili connessioni tra l'acqua, i morti e il femminile alla loro base. Lo studio propone quindi l'adozione del termine “eco-rituale” per catalogare questo fenomeno. In questo modo, viene mostrata una forma culturalmente peculiare di agency femminile: il potere simbolico di influenzare il ciclo dell'acqua, che è allo stesso tempo una forza vivificante ontologica ed economica.

Parole chiave: eco-rituale, agenzia femminile, Italia, Alpi, matricoltura

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse à un rituel « légendaire » qui s'est déroulé au XIXe siècle près de l'église San Salvatore à Albosaggia, un petit village de Valteline, une vallée alpine du nord de l'Italie. Ce rite consistait à immerger des crânes humains afin d'attirer et de repousser l'eau de pluie selon les besoins du moment. Ce rituel est analysé à travers la récupération et la problématisation d'un corpus hétérogène de sources attestant de son historicité. Une hypothèse est ensuite proposée sur les liens entre l'eau, les morts et le féminin qui les sous-tendent. Ainsi, l'étude propose l'adoption du terme « éco-rituel » pour résumer ce phénomène. Ce faisant, une forme culturellement distinctive d'action féminine est mise en évidence : le pouvoir symbolique d'influencer le cycle de l'eau, qui est à la fois une force vivifiante ontologique et économique.

Mots-clés: éco-rituel, agence féminine, Italie, Alpes, matriculture

This article focuses on a particular ritual which involves the symbolic manipulation of rain. It used to take place near the church of San Salvatore in Albosaggia, a small village in

Valtellina, an Alpine valley in Northern Italy. The ritualistic act entailed the deliberate placement of human skulls in direct contact with water and it was performed by elderly women to induce or avert rain. Although oral testimonies collected in the 1980s attest to the practice of this ritual at the beginning of the last century, its historicity has yet to be proven. In fact, until now this rite has been considered to be a legend. However, an examination of a limited number of written sources indicates that, at a minimum, it was performed throughout the nineteenth century.

I offer here a comprehensive, multifaceted, and in-depth analysis of the hydrological, environmental, economic, and religious contexts of the skull-washing ritual of Albosaggia. This facilitates a deeper understanding of the functionality and meaning of this and similar rituals. This approach also illuminates the ecological perspective that informed the rituals, leading to two conclusions: first, that these rituals should be identified as *eco-rituals* and, second, that the symbolic influence of women on the water cycle should be recognised as a culturally unique form of female agency.

Around the essentiality of water

It is evident that liquid water is the most vital fluid element in the environment for all humans and most non-human beings. Rather than being a theoretical knowledge, it is reasonable to assume that this kind of shared primordial awareness primarily manifests itself to humankind as *Zuhandenheit*,¹ or rather, in less philosophical terms, as an example of embodied cognition.² Subsequently, the view of water as a substance of paramount importance might have been solidified through the observation that organisms and flora on land and in the air require it for survival and proliferation. In the end, this understanding has evolved into the identification of a foundational ecological principle, facilitating the domestication of crops and livestock. Conversely, dehydration is likely to have been experienced and understood by the physical organism as potentially fatal, and the boisterous forces of floods, rainstorms and hailstorms, as well as water shortages in agricultural activities, as dangerous.

1 In his 1928 work *Sein und Zeit*, Martin Heidegger posits the notion that, in addition to instruments and completed products, there exist entities that do not necessitate manipulation yet are nonetheless instrumental. Water, for example, can be regarded as an entity of this kind. In this sense, water can be understood through its practicality (*Zuhandenheit*), which can be related to what is in his lexicon termed *Umsicht*, that is to say, a prescient vision of the environment.

2 The theory of embodied cognition suggests that cognitive processes are not exclusively mental, but also physical and sensory. Accordingly, bodily experiences are integral to the comprehension and analysis of sensory information. Consequently, human thinking cannot be regarded as an activity distinct from the body in and through which it is produced. This theory has given rise to a broad interdisciplinary research field, yet the absence of specific authorship hinders the attribution of authorship. Notable proponents of this theory include Francisco Varela (*Embodied Mind*, 1992) and Antonio Damasio (*Descartes's Error*, 1994).

In relation to the above issues and concerns, a variety of irrigation systems and defensive strategies adopted in the past around the world have been extensively documented in numerous historical studies.³ However, it is important to regard rituals that are based on ecological visions, incorporating symbolic human actions and believed to influence the hydrological cycle and meteorological conditions as equivalent responses to the same existential challenges that human societies face in their interaction with their respective 'own' bodies of water, situated within a particular spatial-temporal and cultural context. Although they operate at a non-factual symbolic level, from a historical-cultural perspective their effectiveness is ultimately irrelevant and they constitute an equally valid object of study, to paraphrase Marc Bloch (1924, it. ed. 2016 : 9).

Rainmaking rituals are a prime example of this phenomenon. Observed across a variety of cultures worldwide, these rituals have been the subject of extensive study by numerous anthropologists who have employed a range of approaches in their research (Frazer 1890; Buttree 1930; Randolph 1947; Simonse 1992). Historians have also contributed to this field of enquiry (Rupert 2002; Beattie 2004). Nevertheless, one of the most noteworthy illustrations of the belief that weather was subject to ritual influences in Modern Catholic Europe can be seen in the public ceremonies of Rogations.

In rural areas where the Roman rite was practiced, the Greater Litanies were established and conducted on an annual basis on 25 April, St. Mark's Day. In contrast, the Lesser Litanies were mobile liturgies, usually held on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday prior to the Assumption (Plese 2023). Greater Litanies incorporated prayers that were to be recited to ward off threats to the community's survival. Such dangers included wars and epidemics, as well as storms and blizzards, which could potentially disrupt a successful harvest. During the ritual procession conducted through the agricultural plots, the parish priest would recite a list of possible evils, to which the parishioners in row at his back would respond with the formula *Libera nos* [Free us from], thereby establishing a prolonged collective interplay with the deity of God. The litanies thus served an apotropaic function, encompassing protection from natural cataclysms.

Moreover, in the event of protracted inclement weather, particularly persistent and hazardous rainfall, processions or masses were held. These prayers included requests for a clear sky (*ad postulandam serenitatem*) and an end to rainstorms (*preces ad repellendam tempestatem*). Both prayers, which were recorded in the *Rituale Romanum* from 1614 until the Second Vatican Council's reform, were intended to achieve the same outcome: they were recited in the hope of inducing a change in the weather, that is to say, to halt the falling of rain.

³ Reference is made here to the scientific journal *Water History* and to fundamental contributions from others such as Terje Tvedt, editor of three series of volumes entitled *A History of Water* (2006-2016).

About the Alps in the past

In the context of the 'water towers of Europe,'⁴ the Alps, the general consensus is that the domestication of cereal-producing and animal species commenced approximately four millennia BCE.⁵ Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the earliest records of complex and extensive irrigation systems date back only to the twelfth century CE (Bodini 2002: 22). These water infrastructures are known by various denominations (*Ru/Bisse/Wasser*) and comprise successive series of concave channels constructed from wood and supported by iron claws affixed to the walls of the ledges. The purpose of these channels is to facilitate the transportation of liquid water, sourced from higher latitudes, to lower ones. The water is then distributed through smaller irrigation ditches. It should be noted that the primary function of this structure is not to store water, but rather to convey it during the spring and summer months. This arrangement has not spread throughout the entire alpine arc, though, but is limited to valleys that historically recorded low precipitation rates. It remains functional in a few areas, such as *Alto Adige/Südtirol*, where it is acknowledged as a traditional irrigation system (Ketzer 1997; Bodini 2012; Leibundgut, Vonderstrass 2016). This finding does not immediately imply that the Alpine inhabitants did not deploy other bodies of water for irrigation or other infrastructure for the same purposes, but it corroborates the assertion that rainwater has long played a pivotal role in irrigation across the majority of alpine regions since the advent of agriculture.

It is widely acknowledged that agricultural labour in European alpine valleys is subject to a unique set of challenges that differ from those experienced in lowland plains: the total area of land in an alpine valley is only 25% of the total lowland territory, a percentage that decreases to approximately 10% at higher altitudes (Viazzo 1990: 35). In addition to the presence of forests, bare rocks, permanent snow and glaciers, the available space is subject to influence from other factors, such as solar irradiation and steepness. Consequently, not all areas that are devoid of 'clutter' and potentially suitable for cultivation and farming were necessarily conducive to sufficient artificial watering. While in lowland areas irrigational water can be easily sourced from rivers with a more or less constant flow, in the Alpine regions seasonal fluctuation in the flow of watercourses and the steepness of the slopes (i.e. the force of gravity) renders rainwater an essential component for irrigation. Furthermore, heavy rainfall can lead to significant challenges,

4 The term 'water tower' is employed in the discipline of hydrology and associated sciences to denote mountain chains or highlands that typically contribute substantial quantities of water.

5 In the context of the Alps, however, agriculture and farming must not be considered as activities that are mutually exclusive. Rather, they should be regarded as co-dependent activities that integrate with each other in a semi-closed eco-cultural niche. Historians of the Alps have engaged in prolonged debates concerning the characteristics, immigration strategies and gender-based work activities of *Alpwirtschaft* (see Sanga 1984, 1997). For a concise overview of the extant literature pertaining to the characteristics and taxonomy of *Alpwirtschaft*, consult Gilck and Poschlod (2019).

including landslides and floods, which have historically posed a major threat to alpine communities and cultivated areas.

To date, the number of historical studies reporting on a ritualistic submergence of sacred objects for the purpose of inducing or halting rainfall in the Alpine region is limited. Evidence suggests that a cross was immersed on an annual basis by religious officials at the Barmasc chapel in the Aosta Valley and, on the Mediterranean shore, at San Fruttuoso in Camogli as a preventative measure against drought (Piazza 1998). These occurrences appear to be linked to the submersion of crosses and statues portraying saints in various regions of France, where there is a confluence of numerous collective memories (Sébillot 1905). Studies on centuries-old rituals in Perpignan and Essey, categorised as Christian versions of certain Greek and Roman cults of female deities associated with rain and fertility (Santyves 1933), also support this theory. Moreover, in the seventeenth-century Rhône River basin, the purpose of immersing icons was to protect the productivity of fields and agricultural activities from potential harmful floods (Benoît 1935).

About Valtellina

The alpine region of Valtellina is located in the northernmost reaches of Italy and extends 120 kilometres in length and 66 kilometres in width, demarcating the boundary between the central-eastern and south-eastern Alps. The topography of Valtellina is defined by the Insubric tectonic line, which traverses the region from east to west in the lower and middle sections, and from south to north in the upper portion. This configuration gives rise to a substantial portion of Lower Valtellina being parallel to the Alpine ridge. Consequently, the southern side (Orobic side) experiences shaded conditions, while the Alpine side (Rhaetian side) is exposed to abundant sunlight. From a hydrological perspective, the area falls within the Adda River mountain catchment basin.

With the exception of a brief period,⁶ the region was under the administration of the Grisons between 1512 and 1797, when it joined the Cisalpine Republic, definitively severing its political ties with the Swiss world. Reports compiled during the Napoleonic and Austrian administrations (1797 - 1814 / 1815 - 1859), including those by Francesco Bellati, Antonio Tadini, Melchiorre Gioia, Pietro Rebuschini and Stefano Jacini, if considered as a whole, provide a comprehensive overview of the hydrological conditions of Lower Valtellina and the irrigation and flood protection systems during the first half of

⁶ The uprising, also known as the *Sacro Macello*, resulted in the expulsion of the Grisons from Valtellina for almost two decades (1620-1639). This uprising was primarily driven by political motivations and religious differences between the Protestant-tolerant rulers and the Catholic inhabitants of the region. Interest in the event, given its repercussions on geopolitics of Modern Europe and salience in local history, has recently gained momentum in occasion of its 400th anniversary (see *1620, la rivolta di Valtellina*; 2021).

the nineteenth century. Without excluding scientific articles from the same decades,⁷ the majority of accounts make reference to a rudimentary infrastructure in very few towns and their environs.

It seems that the infrastructure in question comprised a limited number of artificial channels of varying dimensions, the purpose of which was to extract water from streams for limited irrigation of meadows in the valley bottom during the summer farming season and for micro-scale horticultural purposes, that is, within household gardens.⁸ Furthermore, it is certain that the absence of systematic, effective, and stable control of the Adda River and its tributary streams caused floods until the end of the century.⁹

Given the preponderance of Catholicism within the population, it is unsurprising that there are few attestations of religious events regarding the weather. The State Archives of Sondrio (ASSo) holds the Romegialli Collection, which includes documents listing worship expenses paid by deans, including one for the public exposure/exhibition of the mortal remains of Saints *per li bisogni del'acqua* [for the need of water] on 21st of September 1701.¹⁰ Within the same archival fund, there is evidence of multiple acquittances. Among these, there is one from the political authorities that attests to the disbursement of a sum of money to three priests intended to facilitate the observance of three masses, with the intention being the invocation of atmospheric precipitation.¹¹ As part of the aforementioned archival collection, there is also a preserved draft of a formal protest submitted by the archpriest of Sondrio. In this document, the archpriest articulates his concerns regarding the legitimacy of a Confraternity's involvement in processions *per impetrare la pioggia* [to obtain rain] in 1716.¹² Furthermore, a review of documentation held in the Archivio storico comunale di Sondrio reveals financial expenditures incurred for cult affairs between 1801 and 1829, including those related to *rumate* [thunderstorms].¹³

7 One example among many, *Memoria sull'agricoltura del Dipartimento dell'Adda* (1813), bears the signature of Ambrogio del Majno.

8 More than fifty years later, Ercole Bassi's comment is of particular significance: "L'irrigazione è praticata in poche località e quasi limitatamente ai prati, sebbene gli abbondanti corsi d'acqua perenni permetterebbero una irrigazione quasi generale. Tra le località dove maggiormente si usa l'acqua a scopo irrigatorio si indicano i conoidi del Tartano, di Postalesio, di Ponte, i piani di Sondrio, di Bormio [...]" (*La Valtellina* 1890 : 95).

[English]: "Irrigation is practiced in a few localities and almost limited to meadows, although the abundant perennial watercourses would allow almost general irrigation. Among the places where water is mostly used for irrigation purposes are the alluvial fans of Tartano, Postalesio, Ponte, the plains of Sondrio, Bormio [...]"

9 See Valentini C., *La sistemazione idraulica della Valtellina*, Milano, Tipografia e litografia degli Ingegneri, 1890.

10 ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 17, fasc. 12, sottof. 2

11 ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 17, fasc. 12, sottof. 2

12 ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 22, fasc. 9, sottof. 12

13 Archivio storico comunale di Sondrio, b. 171, fasc. 1

On the Orobic side, Albosaggia and the church of San Salvatore

It can be further attested that the parishes of villages on the Orobic side near Sondrio, the main town of the valley, used to perform communal religious processions evoking rainfall whose final destination was the church of San Salvatore in Albosaggia. Considered at that time - and still today - as one of the oldest places of worship in the entire valley, this church would later become known for being the burial site of immense human remains.¹⁴ During over two decades as parish priest in both Albosaggia and Caiolo, Bernardo Petrucci left notes about these religious parades. On April 19, 1807, in response to inquiries from his superior, Andrea Sertorio, vicar forane of Sondrio, Petrucci stated:

[...] Great is the devotion not only of the People of Albosaggia, but also of all the nearby Parishes, who contribute in procession to the public needs, even though it is located on a mountain, that is, a disastrous and almost solitary *Alpe*.¹⁵

In his personal diary, the so-called *Effemeridi* - in which local and major events are reported alongside observations of trends in various fields, and consequently meteorological conditions - Petrucci indicated that the church of San Salvatore was the designated arrival point for at least three ritual processions, which were held with the specific intention of bringing an end to periods of drought.

At the beginning of this month [August 1803] there was a great drought. We went in process to S. Salvatore, the Novena of the Virgin of the Assumption was said, and God, moved with compassion, granted the much needed water.¹⁶

The drought continues. Public prayers are held everywhere, but the water cannot be seen. On the 21st [July 1806], standing in procession at S. Salvatore. The weather was clear, windy and cold, yet those despondent souls received a

14 “La Comparrocchiale di S. Salvatore è cospicua per la sua antichità, e per la particolare divozione che si professa alle anime defunte, le di cui ossa ivi si trovano. Infatti è sorprendente il numero delle Ossa, che ivi si trovano, e sembra incredibile che in quella Chiesa possa essere stati sepolti tanti cadaveri. Si osservano eziando delle Ossa di straordinaria grandezza, quali da tutti gl’osservatori hanno ecitato meraviglia.” (ASDC, Curia, Miscellanea, b.4 fasc.1, s.fasc. 22, f. 3v)

15 “Grande s’è la divozione non solo del Popolo d’Albosaggia, ma ancora di tutte le vicine Parrocchie, quali concorrono processionalmente ne’ pubblici bisogni, benché trovasi sopra un monte, ossia Alpe disastroso, e quasi solitario.” (ADSC, Curia, Miscellanea, b.4 fasc.1, s.fasc. 22, f. 3v)

16 “Nel principio di questo mese [agosto 1803] si provò una grande siccità. S’andò processualmente a S. Salvatore, si fece la Novena della Vergine Assunta, e Dio mosso a compassione concesse l’acqua tanto necessaria.” (ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 18, fasc. 16, f. 12v)

fair amount of rain that same evening, which then resumed on the 24th, and now the campaign is very promising and has advanced. Although rye and wheat suffered due to the dry weather, and consequently the harvest was very poor in the Plains.¹⁷

[July 1807] The countryside is what can be called beautiful. The drought now makes us fear. Prayers, offices, processions are held, and God shed some water at the end of the month. We hope for more to come. We also went to S. Salvatore, to the Madonna, and to Moda, and every evening it always came a little water, so much so that the countryside did not get worse.¹⁸

As reported, lack of precipitation was a significant cause for concern, even fear, particularly considering the absence of any substantial irrigation systems or water storage infrastructure in the area during dry summer months. Ultimately, the site where people gathered for *public needs*, which is to say, for the necessity of rainwater, was San Salvatore, where they sought intercession, either directly from God or indirectly through prayers to Madonna. However, Petrucci never alluded to any rituals about rainwater that did not conform to Catholic standards during his years of service. There are no mentions of non-standard rituals in both his personal documents and the pastoral care questionnaire sent to him prior to Bishop Carlo Rovelli's visit in 1796. It is of interest to note that there are no other individuals, either before or after Petrucci, who ever made mention of such rituals.¹⁹

This absence may be the main reason why Remo Bracchi, the most prominent linguist of the Valtellina dialect, appeared dubious regarding the existence of water-related rituals involving human skull bones in the past. He dismissed them as a “[...] remembrance of a rain ritual that appears to hark back to other times and other regions [that] is handed down.”²⁰ His proficiency in the domain of local folkloric studies is held in such high esteem that it is not uncommon for both amateurs and academics to have always referred to

17 “La siccità continua. Pubbliche orazioni si fanno d’ogni dove, ma l’acqua non si vede. Nel dì 21 [luglio 1806] stando processionalmente a S. Salvatore. Il tempo era Sereno, Ventoso, e freddo, eppure quelle anime defonte c’ottennero la sera stessa una discreta pioggia, che poi riprese nel dì 24, ed ora la Campagna ripromette assai, ed è avanzata. Sebbene la segale e fromento abbi patito per l’asciutto, e per conseguenza la raccolta fu scarsissima nelle Pianure.” (ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 18, fasc. 16, f. 22v)

18 “[Luglio 1807] La Campagna è quello che si pò dire di bello. La Siccità ora ci fà temere. Si fanno Orazioni, Uffici, Processioni, e Dio sul finir del Mese mudò qualche po’ d’acqua. Si spira ne verrà dell’altra. Anco noi siamo andati a S. Salvatore, alla Madonna, ed alla Moda, ed ogni sera venne sempre un po’ d’acqua, tanto che la Campagna non andava peggiorando.” (ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 18, fasc. 16, f. 25r)

19 The question of why is addressed later in the final paragraph.

20 “Ad Albossaggia si tramanda memoria di un rito di pioggia che sembra richiamarsi ad altri tempi e ad altre latitudini.” (*Nomi e volti della paura nelle valli dell’Adda e del Mera* 2009 : 82)

these rituals as fictional legends.²¹ Therefore, prior to an analysis of these rituals as attempts to determine the precipitation cycle trend, it is necessary to reaffirm their historicity. By doing so, the focus is directed towards accounts that have hitherto been overlooked.

The rainfall rite

In his extensive research into Italian popular traditions in the 19th century, Giovanni Tassoni (1977: 135) identified water-related rituals taking place in Albosaggia by referencing the contribution of Giambattista Marchesi, published in July 1898 for *Archivio per le Tradizioni Popolari*. In his article, Marchesi remarks on the use of a bell known as *baiona*, which was specifically designed to be rung only during storms in order to dispel them, but also briefly reports how, in times of need – notably during drought or potential flooding of the Livrio creek – local farmers would visit the church of San Salvatore to retrieve large skulls of the deceased and bath/wash them in the nearby brook, with the intention of appeasing the spirits of the deceased in antiquity.²²

21 “Da sempre la chiesa di S. Salvatore ha alimentato una religiosità e una venerazione ammantate da un alone ricco di suggestioni evocatrici di quei riti misteri tipici dell’era pagana e dei quali non era scevro nemmeno il nascere del Cristianesimo [...] Intorno a S. Salvatore fioriscono religiosità e superstizione, leggenda e storia [...] Nell’ossario erano visibili, sino a non molto tempo fa, ossa dalle proporzioni eccezionali e per esse la popolazione ebbe un culto singolare. Era credenza diffusa infatti che quei teschi e quegli scheletri nell’ossario, situato sul lato sud della chiesa e accessibile a tutti, avessero poteri miracolosi per cui, quando si scatenavano i temporali estivi e i tuoni, il vento, i lampi e la grandine sembravano minacciare l’esistenza delle loro povere abitazioni, la donna più anziana della comunità scendeva nell’ossario, prelevava uno dei teschi più grossi e si recava nel vicino vangelo per un lavacro rituale” (Paganoni C., *San Salvatore: miti, riti, leggenda e storia*, in *Notiziario Banca Popolare di Sondrio* (num.71), pp. 111-112)

[English]: “The church of S. Salvatore has always nurtured a religiosity and veneration shrouded in an aura rich in suggestions evoking those mystery rites typical of the pagan era and of which even the birth of Christianity was not free [...] Around S. Salvatore, religiosity and superstition, legend and history flourish [...] In the ossuary, until not long ago, bones of exceptional proportions were visible and the population had a singular cult for them. It was in fact a widespread belief that those skulls and skeletons in the charnel, located on the south side of the church and accessible to all, had miraculous powers so that, when summer storms broke out and thunder, wind, lightning and hail seemed to threaten the existence of their poor homes, the oldest woman in the community went down into the ossuary, took one of the largest skulls and went to the nearby gospel for a ritual washing”.

22 “Nella chiesa di S. Salvatore, la più antica di Valtellina, son conservati certi grandi teschi di morti. In tempo di siccità, oppure quando il Livrio troppo ingrossato minaccia la campagna, i contadini salgono lassù, prendono i teschi e li vanno a bagnare e a lavare nell’ acqua del torrente, perché credono così di propiziarsi gli spiriti di quegli antichi defunti.” (*In Valtellina* 1898: 422)

Another attestation of this ritual can be found in the diaries of Bruno Galli-Valerio,²³ in which he documented his hiking expeditions between 1898 and 1910. In the preface of his memoir, the Professor recollects his ascent of the Liri Valley in the company of Dr. Carini, who selected the occasion to ascertain the dimensions of preserved crania and bones in the charnel of San Salvatore. Prior to resuming their journey, the local priest cautioned them against the risk of interchanging the two skulls that Galli-Valerio reports were placed on one of the three altars of the church. Indeed, it was made clear to them that, under the attentive observation of the local population, switching the crania was believed to have potentially fatal consequences. This was because, by bringing the appropriate skull close to a creek, one of them was specifically used to induce precipitation, and the other to evoke the sun.²⁴ These rituals, though, can be traced even further back in time.

Despite its lack of clarity and brevity, a notable reference to these local rainwater rituals can be found in a guide published in 1873 at the behest of the local section of the Club alpino italiano (CAI).²⁵ This publication reports on the existence of a distinctive cult centred on the colossal skeletons preserved in San Salvatore, practised by the villagers from nearby towns.²⁶ A further reference, concise yet more substantial, can be drawn from historian Cesare Cantù, an eminent figure in the intellectual realm of Risorgimental

23 Bruno Galli-Valerio was professor at the University of Lausanne, where he had been teaching veterinary for 40 years. He published as a hiking enthusiast *Cols et sommets* in 1911, a collection of all the writings and descriptions about his crossings of the Alps. The first Italian edition would be published posthumous in 1993. Differently from all the other excursions, the episode here summarized has no date. In fact it is recalled in a list of folkloristic uses and customs in the preface of the book that is titled *Attorno a Sondrio*. But it's sure that the occasion nor did occur before 1888, the year of the first trek described, nor after 1910, year of the latest one.

24 "...per un'altra serie di passi, si porti verso ovest nella valle del Liri al romantico eremo di S. Salvatore. Troverà là ampio ristoro alle sue fatiche nella Pensione Alpina, le cui finestre apronsi sul gran panorama del Bernina e del Disgrazia. Se egli s'interessa di antropologia, troverà nell'ossario della chiesupola degli scheletri interessantissimi. Ne ho misurato un gran numero con il dott. Carini, molti anni fa. Il curato, autorizzandoci, ci aveva detto: - Per amor del cielo, non mischiate i due crani che trovansi sull'altare. I contadini li portano di quando in quando vicino al torrente, l'uno per far piovere, l'altro per avere il sole. Uno scambio potrebbe aver delle conseguenze funeste -. Il brav'uomo non aveva l'aria di credere all'azione miracolosa dei due crani, ma essendovi dei realisti più realisti del re, vi son dei credenti più credenti del loro curato. E noi li vedemmo infatti fissare i loro occhi luccicanti nel mentre misuravamo i crani in questione, per ben sorvegliare che li rimettavamo nuovamente ai loro rispettivi posti! Ci parve non esserci sbagliati!" (*Punte e passi* 1993: 37-38)

25 Club alpino italiano (Italian Alpine Club) was founded in 1863 in Turin by Quintino Sella. The club's aim is to valorize the mountain climbing among the Alps "in all its manifestations, the knowledge and study of the mountains, especially the Italian ones, and the defense of their natural environment" (*Club alpino italiano: Statuto* : Title 1 - Article 1)

26 "La tradizione pretende che essa sia stata edificata da cristiani bergamaschi, quando ancora il culto pagano prevaleva nella regioni orobie, e che quivi, per salvarli dalle profanazioni, si trasportassero i cadaveri dei cristiani morti di là dei monti. Vi si conservano tutt'ora alcuni colossali scheletri, pei quali gli abitanti dei vicini villaggi hanno un culto singolare" (*Guida alle acque minerali della Valtellina*, 1873: 56)

and post-Unitarian Italy. It is noteworthy that the following reference dates to 1847; it is the oldest documentary attestation to the ritual available:

In a municipality near Sondrio, a peculiar method is employed during severely dry weather. A skull from a revered ossuary is taken and submerged in a stream until the desired rainfall occurs. Since this remedy is only used in emergencies, rainfall usually comes quickly.²⁷

Finally, further evidence pertaining to the practice of these rituals has been recorded in the journal *Cenni statistici e notizie patrie*:

And before anything else it is up to them [the Teachers] to clear the minds of the young people of Valtellina of those prejudices that they have sucked from their birth, and direct them to those healthy readings [...] And to speak of the prejudices and superstitions that are common among the people, and always to their detriment, it should be made clear once and for all: how it is not true that the doctor has the ampoule for the deadly poison for cholera, and to prove it with facts; how dangerous it is to ring the bells when a storm is coming; *how false it is to dip the skulls of the dead in the water to obtain rain*; no less foolish is the belief in the apparition of souls. Furthermore, remove from their minds the idea of witches and their spells [...]²⁸

These written testimonies do not constitute first-hand reports, since they were not compiled while or after assisting the rituals. Nevertheless, they prove the existence of this practice, at least as far as the nineteenth century is concerned. Their temporal distribution not only demonstrates continuity of the rituals throughout the entire century, but also suggests the possibility of its practice in preceding ones. This hypothesis, however, remains largely unsubstantiated by historical evidence, precluding a definitive confirmation or further speculations about the origins or relations of the rituals with similar ones.²⁹

27 “Un altro strano rimedio è usato in un comune vicino di Sondrio. Quando la stagione corra pericolosamente asciutta, prendono un teschio da un ossario venerato, e lo sommergono in un rigagno, finché la pioggia desiderata non arrivi. Poiché il rimedio si fa ne’ casi estremi, di rado l’acqua importata si fa aspettare.” (*Racconti* 1847 : 246)

28 “E prima d’ogni altra cosa incumbe ad essi [i Maestre e le Maestre] di sgombrare dalla mente de’ giovani valtelinesi que’ pregiudizi che succhiano dal loro nascere, e dirigerli a quelle sane letture ... E per dir de’ pregiudizi e delle superstizioni che corrono fra il popolo, e sempre a suo danno, dovrebbero una volta chiarirlo: come non sia vero che il medico abbia l’ampollina pel mortifero veleno pei cholerosi, e provarlo coi fatti; come pericolo il suonar le campane al giungere di un temporale; falso il tuffare nelle acque i teschi da morto per ottenere la pioggia; non meno che sciocca la credenza nell’apparizione delle anime. Togliere in oltre dalla mente l’idea delle streghe e de’ loro malefici” (*Cenni statistici e notizie patrie: strenna per l’anno 1856*. pp. 77-78)

29 Since Roman times, Valtellina was inhabited by Celts, Bradley’s report may be noteworthy: “Among the most intriguing objects unearthed at what has come to be known as Coventina’s well at Carrawburgh

The role of elderly women

It is imperative to acknowledge the feminine aspect of the ritual at this juncture; the use of *maschile sovraesteso* (overextended masculine) in the available written accounts obscure the issue.³⁰ With the exception of Cantù's decision to opt for the impersonal form, the rite is generally described by employing the terms *abitanti*, *contadini* and *giovani valtellinesi*, that is to say, words in the masculine plural.

Nevertheless, the role of women is highlighted in two local oral testimonies, albeit in a problematic manner. The accounts of water-related rituals in Albosaggia were collected decades after the remembered events, and it is reasonable to assume that they pertain to one of the last performances, or, paradoxically, the final one. In the 1980s, Ms. Candida Mattarelli, an 89-year-old woman, recalled an event that seemingly marked the shift in the rite's reception, from acceptance to rejection. She was in her youth during this account:

During a particularly dry summer, it had not rained for about two months and the meadows were parched by drought, the farmers were very worried about the survival of their livestock and themselves. The rogations had been made, but everything was useless, the sun continued to shine, not even a shadow of rain. An old peasant woman then thought of those miraculous skulls as an extreme remedy. She went down to the ossuary, carefully chose the largest

are a collection of small bronze heads and a human skull. The Celts were well known as a head hunter and for believing that the head was the most important part of the body, being the source of prophecy and wisdom and symbolizing divine power. The discovery of human skulls at a number of wells and springs has led to speculation that there may have been a close association between this head cult and the Celts' veneration of sacred waters" (*Water: A Spiritual History* 2012 : 43) About the head cult, see also Clarke, D., *The head cult: tradition and folklore surrounding the symbol of the severed human head in the British Isles*, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1998. In his research, Clarke examines the findings of human skulls in locations characterised by the presence of water, with a particular focus on wells. This analysis suggests a potential association between ritual decapitation and the consecration of these sites. By enlarging the focus from mountainous Valtellina to lowlands in Lombardy, a strong resemblance with a rite in the community of Cornaredo during the 16th century has been documented. In the volume *Archivio Spirituale, Sez. XIV, vol. 67*, which was dated between 1576 and 1579 and found in the *Archivio Vescovile* by Antonio Lurati in the 1960s, there are references to various superstitions of the whole region. More specifically, regarding the aforementioned town, it reads "per far piovere, si pigliono teste e altre ossa di morto, e si buttino ne i fontanili" [English]: "to make it rain, heads and other bones of the dead are taken and thrown into the water springs" (Lurati, o., *Superstizioni lombarde (e lev-entinesi) del tempo di San Carlo Borromeo*, in *Vox romanica* (vol. 27), 1968, p. 245

³⁰ Use of the Italian expression *maschile sovraesteso* (overextended masculine) is meant to problematize the fact that Italian historical disciplines seem to be indifferent or unaware of their present chauvinism and its representational force and normative power in documents of the past. At that time, and still today, for example, there is a linguistic convention for Italian speakers to refer to a group of people as men regardless of the genders of its members.

skull, and went to wash it in the nearby valley sure of obtaining the result desired by everyone. [...] Then finally the rain began to fall. Everyone was overcome with sudden joy. 'The dead have given us grace', they said to each other. They had spoken too quickly. The rain turned into a hurricane, the wind uprooted the trees, some roofs were blown off, the streams and streams swelled fearfully and then the hail fell [...] People then thought that all that chaos had been caused by the sacrilegious act that had upset the peace of the ossuary.³¹

Two local historians have also retrieved a memory of a similar incident. It is possible this represents the same event, recalled by different individuals, but it is cited by Bracchi without acknowledgement of Tassoni's contribution.

Ol Marii di Furtii, also known as Marinàal, because she was short, once took one of those skulls and brought it to the Valley to wash it. It hadn't rained in a long time. It was worth trying to wash a *cràpa da mòrt*, to see if a little water came out, as had happened other times. But that time a storm broke out, causing damage. Then everyone scold her!"³²

The evidence suggests that this ritualistic practice had been a long-standing remedy for drought and that the responsibility for collecting one of the 'miraculous' skulls at San Salvatore was assigned to elderly female figures.³³ The negative perception can be attributed to a diluted version of heartfelt beliefs and prejudices related to female sorcery

31 "Durante un'estate particolarmente secca, non pioveva da circa due mesi e i prati erano arsi dalla siccità, i contadini erano molto preoccupati per la sopravvivenza del bestiame e per loro stessi. Erano state fatte le rogazioni, ma tutto fu inutile, il sole continuava a splendere, della pioggia nemmeno l'ombra. Una vecchia contadina pensò allora, come estremo rimedio, a quei teschi "miracolosi". Scese nell'ossario, scelse con cura il teschio più grosso, e andò a lavarlo nella vicina valletta (Val dela Gésa), sicura di ottenere il risultato tanto desiderato da tutti. "Vedrete che pioverà", assicurò. Infatti all'improvviso il cielo si oscurò, tuoni e lampi squarciavano l'aria. Poi finalmente cominciò a cadere la pioggia. Tutti furono presi da un'improvvisa allegria. "I morti ci hanno fatto la grazia", si dicevano l'un l'altro. Avevano parlato troppo in fretta. La pioggia si trasformò in uragano, il vento sradicò gli alberi, alcuni tetti furono scoperti, i torrenti e i ruscelli si gonfiarono paurosamente e poi cadde la grandine. La gente era terrorizzata, se ne stava chiusa in casa a pregare, qualcuno buttava manciate di sale sul sagrato della chiesa per scongiurare il pericolo; furono suonate anche le campane ma il nubifragio imperversò per giorni e giorni. La gente pensò che tutto quel finimondo fosse stato causato dal gesto sacrilego che aveva sconvolto la pace dell'ossario." (*Albosaggia, appunti di storia e di arte. Vita contadina. Tradizioni e leggende* 1987 :) It is necessary, firstly, to underline that the Italian translation reported here is, in its turn, a transcription of what the woman interviewed said in her local dialect, and secondly, that it is a relatively partial account.

32 "Ol Marii di Furtii, detta anche Marinàal, perché era piccola, una volta ha preso uno di quei teschi e l'ha portato nella Valle, per lavarlo. Era tanto che non pioveva. Valeva la pena provare a lavare una *cràpa da mòrt*, per vedere se veniva un po' d'acqua, come era successo altre volte. Ma quella volta è scoppiato un temporale, che ha fatto danni. Allora tutti a sgridarla!" (*La vita sui monti di Albosaggia* 2004 : 40)

and supernatural powers. These beliefs and prejudices endured over centuries until the days in which these rituals were lastly enacted. By acknowledging this dynamic, one can begin to comprehend the ecological perspective that underlies the ritual.

As in many parts of Modern Europe, Valtellina engaged in persecutions of individuals accused of practising malignant activities. Women, in particular, were often accused of summoning storms through the use of malefic dust (Bracchi 2010 : 3).³⁴ Francesco Angiolini's report, compiled in 1812 during his period of service as Prefect of the Adda Department, provides evidence of the endurance of witchcraft beliefs over the nineteenth century.³⁵ In common with the other heads of the twenty-four administrative subdivisions of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy, Angiolini was mandated to ask a series of questions based on the *Questionnaires Généraux* of the Celtic Academy as modeled by Giovanni Scopoli. His answers concerning religious and popular belief in his region are particularly notable; it is needless to state that exercising authority as the most prestigious administrator of the region does not guarantee more objectivity. However, his report likely contains more accuracy about how detrimental these preconceived and unfounded opinions could have been on a social level.

[...] It is a common belief that sorcerers, malice, and envy are responsible for charms, illnesses, and misfortunes of all kinds. [...] Furthermore, this persistence in such prejudice is mainly due to the terrible preaching [...] and ignorance of the courts. [...] Such deep and tenacious prejudices against the existence of sorcerers exist that some families believe the profession is hereditary. Unfortunately, even a beautiful and morally excellent girl who possesses such talents risks being rejected by the lowest of beggars despite her ability to bring them fortune and happiness.³⁶

33 The utilisation of skulls and human remains, specifically from ossuaries in the Alpine region, for medical purposes or as amulets, has been documented during the period spanning from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. This phenomenon, which is of particular interest, is discussed in Farrow, T.J., *Relics of (the) people: Ossuary Remains in Postmedieval European Folk Practice*

34 The most infamous local trials against women accused of practicing sorcery were held in Bormio between 1629 and 1632. For further details, see Silvestri's essays at the website <https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/bormio/saggi/>

35 Another account of this kind of belief, for a later period (1850's), has already been cited. See the extract from *Cenni* previously cited.

36 "Di qui nasce che generalmente si crede ai fattucchieri, alla malignità ed invidia, de' quali vengono attribuiti i fascini, le malattie e le disgrazie d'ogni genere. [...] Dippiù, questa persistenza in siffatto pregiudizio devesi anche attribuire per la massima parte alla pessima predicazione, che già da tanto tempo trovasi in possesso di questi pergami, e all'ignoranza de' tribunali. I preti ed i giudici, lungi dal combattere sì perniciosi errori, sembrano anzi sanzionarli coll'apporvi i primi il suggello della religione, i secondi quello della giustizia. Quegli esercitavano, questi facevano abbruciare. Questo pregiudizio dell'esistenza degli stregoni ha gettate sì profonde e tenaci radici, che se ne suppone ereditaria la professione in alcune famiglie; ed una fanciulla che abbia la disgrazia di appartenervi, sia pur bella e di eccellenti costumi, ella rischia di vedersi rifiutata dal più vil pezzente di cui potrebbe fare la fortuna e la felicità." (*Rapporto del Prefetto Angiolini in Arti e Tradizioni* 1973 : 133-34)

At the time Ms. Candidelli was in her youth – that is to say, the first and second decades of the twentieth century, during which the episode she recalled had taken place – the severe repercussions of being labelled as a witch or wizard had been progressively reduced. This is probably the reason that the rite is labeled as a *sacrilegious act* instead of a magical one. At the same time, perhaps, it could have been considered a ritual violation compared to the standardised formula rather than in its strict sense; it seems on that ritual occasion, a generic skull retrieved from the charnel was used instead of one of the intended two left on the altar of San Salvatore.

While it remains unclear whether the ritual conducted on each occasion was deemed successful, it is evident that the negative outcome led to the officiant (and the rite itself) acquiring a negative connotation in the collected memories, rather than the reverse.

The reverence for the dead and the cult of Madonna

Angiolini's report also facilitates a reconstruction of the ecological perspective that informed the rituals. Firstly, it illustrates the lasting and costly reverence paid to the deceased by the inhabitants of Valtellina, as well as how their contribution to agricultural labour was considered to be active in daily life. Concerning the spiritual connection between the living and the dead, he observed that:

The people of Valtellina are very inclined towards piety and veneration towards the souls of the deceased. No attention is paid to economy in providing them with respite services; and the farmer advises them of his needs, and among the dangers that sometimes appear to help their friends and neighbors, to take care of the overwhelming agricultural chores, or when a loaded donkey falls to them, to lend a hand to raise it again.³⁷

Secondly, he reported two singular opinions about regarding the relationship between the living and the dead. The first of these is of particular relevance:

The former is that some of the ancient cemeteries are believed to have preferentially received the mortal remains of people who were generally more grateful to God than the others.³⁸

³⁷ “Il popolo valtellino è assai inclinato alla pietà ed alla venerazione verso le anime dei trapassati. Non si bada ad economia per procurar loro dei servizi di requie; ed il contadino si raccomanda loro de' suoi bisogni, e fra i pericoli si pretende che alle volte appariscono ad aiutare i loro amici e vicini, per isbrigarli delle soverchie faccende dell'agricoltura, o quando cade loro un giumento carico, a porger mano per rialzarlo.” (*Rapporto del Prefetto Angiolini in Arti e Tradizioni* 1973 : 134)

Finally, Angiolini's report demonstrates an evident attachment by the people of Valtellina to the figure of the Madonna, to the extent that the popular devotion seems to defy the religious norms of the time:

The people pride themselves on a great devotion towards the Blessed Virgin, to whom a declared partiality for this valley is attributed. She is venerated everywhere, nor is there a parish church in which She does not have an altar and sometimes three, under different denominations - for example of Carmelo, of the Rosary, of the Snow, of the Addolorata, of the Good Counsel, of the Girdle, of the Immaculate, of the Assumption, and so on. The rudeness and simplicity of the plebs is such that it often happens that they commit irreverence at the high altar to address that of the Blessed Virgin.³⁹

These are very significant elements, insofar as it was believed that the ossuary of San Salvatore was the oldest in the region and that the phenomenon of religious devotion to the Madonna seems to recall that of the cult of the black Madonnas, linked to ancient deities of fertility or water (Jorio 2008; van Cronenburg 2004). Therefore, a correlation between womanhood and the element of water may stand as a relevant cultural fact in regards the rituals of Albosaggia: not only were elderly women the ones to perform the rainfall rite, but also one of the altars in the church of San Salvatore was dedicated to the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Around, behind, and beyond the morphology of the rite

The rainfall rituals described herein are similar to the processions referred to by Petrucci, as they are both performing acts with allegedly ecological consequences. However, their goals differ: indeed, as Marchesi and Galli-Valerio reported at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the objective of making it rain was as important as the objective of stopping it. It can be ruled out that the same dual function existed before, since previous sources mention only the former. The discrepancy can be explained by hypothesizing a possible ritual adaptation to the changed environmental conditions of Valtellina.

38 “La prima si è che alcuni degli antichi cimiteri sono a preferenza creduti aver ricettate le spoglie mortali di persone generalmente più grate a Dio, che non gli altri.” (*Rapporto del Prefetto Angiolini in Arti e Tradizioni* 1973 : 134)

39 “Il popolo si picca di una grande divozione verso la beata Vergine, a cui viene attribuita una dichiarata parzialità per questa valle. Dessa è venerata da per tutto, né avvi chiesa parrocchiale in cui non abbia un altare e talvolta tre, sotto differenti denominazioni – per esempio del Carmelo, del Rosario, della Neve, dell'Addolorata, del Buon Consiglio, della Cintura, dell'Immacolata, dell'Assunzione, e così discorrendo. La rozzezza e semplicità della plebe è tale, che spesso accade che commettansi delle irriverenze all'altar maggiore per rivolgersi a quello della beata Vergine.” (*Rapporto del Prefetto Angiolini in Arti e Tradizioni* 1973 : 135)

Regarding the malleability of cultural phenomena related to an ecosystem, it has been recently observed in various areas that ritual performances are adopting new meanings and functions due to altered environmental and meteorological conditions caused by climate change (Ombati 2021). Despite the differences today, Valtellina of the nineteenth century faced progressively exponential deforestation that began to accelerate during Napoleonic era: the forest coverage hit its lowest point of extension around the 1860s (Agnoletti et al. 2003; Zoia 2003). It is reasonable to assume that the resulting higher hydrological risk throughout the region put a well-known threat to a new level of danger.⁴⁰ The awareness or even the fear of floods is likely to have inspired the addition of an option for stopping rain (existing or threatened) to the already-existing function of producing it. The function of stopping the rain must therefore be considered complementary, but certainly not secondary.

Both the number of participants in these rituals and the frequency of their performance are uncertain due to the lack of detailed descriptions, but it is certain that the decisive gesture for inducing or repelling rain was the contact of human skulls with surface water. It is impossible to determine whether the required cranium had been always collected directly from one of the altars of the church of San Salvatore, or from its charnel. In fact, there is no record of two crania being used for decoration on one of the three altars, which may have been intentionally left unreported by local clergy.⁴¹ Galli-Valerio's account, however, suggests that the ritual had undergone some form of standardization by the time he visited the church.

At the same time, there is little doubt that the two skulls were alternately submerged into the waters of the Livrio creek, most likely in its upper branch. Not only due to its proximity

40 Despite the fact that uncontrolled deforestation had already begun to impact the hydrological levels of much of the Italian peninsula by the late eighteenth century, and despite the fact that the side effects of this practice were widely recognised and often disregarded (Vecchio 1978 : 198), it took over fifty years for the intellectual and scientific classes of Lombardy to properly address the causal link in alpine regions such as Valtellina. Trees are vital for absorbing excess rainfall and maintaining the stability of steep terrain through their root systems. Petrucci's *Effemiridi* are valuable not only for their documentation of one of the earliest episodes following the widespread deforestation of the Valtellina region, but also for their role in highlighting the pervasive concern over this issue among previous generations and legislators.

“L’indolenza de’ rappresentanti Comunali all’epoca della Rivoluzione sino presente nel contenere i contadini nel taglio delle Piante nei Boschi Tensi fu il motivo di questa luttuosa disgrazia, mentre non fu la quantità d’acqua, ma le rovine che seco l’acqua traeva nel Bosco così detto della Beccaria. Bosco, che i nostri Vecchi lo consideravano come Santo, e che nessuno si sarebbe azzardato tagliare un sol legno [...]” (ASSo, Raccolta Romegialli, b. 18, fasc. 16, f. 26r). In summary, he ascertained that the flooding of the Torchione river in December 1807 was not attributable to the higher-than-average amount of rainfall; rather, it was a consequence of the destruction of the wooded areas that had been intentionally left intact in the past to avoid water-related environmental hazards. To emphasise their inviolability, as a religious man, he describes the woods as *sacred*, whereas the common term was *boschi tensi*.

41 As previously outlined in note 19.

to the church's site, but mostly because it is the main watercourse that runs throughout the surrounding *alpeggi* [high altitude pasture meadows]. From comparing the sources, it is unclear whether the skull was simply immersed or carefully washed, but from the few oral testimonies available, it is certain that the ritual act should be performed only by elderly women. Ultimately, one could argue that a deep connection between femininity, death, and water had been established.

This multiple associative crossing and linking can be decoded both in terms of similitudes by analogy and of symbolic proximity by opposition or juxtaposition. The skull is considered one of the most expressive physical remains of a dead person and, therefore, the interface through which is possible to reach out to their spirit, as Marchesi points out. Additionally, according to the common beliefs about death outlined by Angiolini, those spirits were felt to be closer to God than others since their mortal remains were buried into the ossuary of San Salvatore, which, at that time, was already considered to be one of the most ancient churches of the entire valley.

Old age was the condition that granted ritual use of the skulls to the performer, since it is the closest condition to death (with the exception of disease), even if it corresponds to infertility in women. In other words, only those who once had been able to conceive life were empowered to handle death. As a result, female-ness must have been the *conditio sine qua non* for performing such an important ritual around the rain; womanhood is strongly associated with life and with the element of water, as the devotion to the figure of the Madonna seems to suggest.

Final remarks: archival silence, women's agency, and *eco-rituals*

As previously noted, neither Bernardo Petrucci nor his predecessors or successors commented on this ritual. When Petrucci was asked about possible *abusi* [non-compliant behaviour] among his parishioners, he replied that there were many and incorrigible. He identified the consumption of wine on Sunday and other religious festivities as the worst.⁴² His response was vague and incomplete, which is puzzling given the fact that he was an attentive observer. His silence, and that of all parish priests, is remarkable, but can be explained by several non-exclusive hypotheses.

While it is plausible some priests never attended such rituals due to the remoteness of the church, it is more likely true to say that others may have remained intentionally silent

42 "Abusi ve ne sono, ma in questi tempi non si saprebbe come rimediare, il maggior abuso è la frequenza all'Osteria anco ne tempi di sacri Vesperi, e della Dottrina, ma la maggior parte sono Artigiani di Sondrio, che vengono a diporto. L'Osteria è però lontana dalla Chiesa" (ASDC, Curia, Visite Pastoralì, cart. 207, fasc. 2, f. 55)

before their superiors.⁴³ Between 1892 and 1908, for example, Albosaggia received three pastoral visits and questionnaires from the diocese of Como. These questionnaires included a specific question on the management of storms, which, however, he did not answer (except for a reference to the *baiona* and collective prayers, above). The period in question coincides almost exactly with that in which Galli-Valerio carried out his numerous alpine expeditions, so that it can be said that the rite, although known to the local religious authorities, was never deliberately reported to diocesan representatives. It should also be noted that the rite had been probably ignored during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even if known, because the diocese of Como was mainly concerned with the spread of Protestantism in Valtellina. Calvinism particularly flourished there, thanks to the religious tolerance of the Grisons.

In the end, it could be assumed that any priests who were aware of these unorthodox rain rituals did not remain in silence from a disinterested tolerance, but rather out of a desire to avoid attracting unwanted attention or annoyance from the bishop's authority, or even out of a self-interest in preserving the good name of their religious work. Whatever the explanation may be, the historicity of these rituals cannot be disregarded or misconstrued as a mere collective fantasy or memory. As seen, the testimonies collected in the 1980's can be supported and solidified by assembling brief descriptions from different sources from the nineteenth century.

This ritual of *making and stopping* rain near the church San Salvatore was intentionally intended to affect material reality. More specifically, the threefold connection between womanhood, death, and water structured a common ecological vision in which rainfall could be influenced by elderly women asking intercession from the most venerated spirits of the valley through a ritualistic interaction of human skulls with surface water. Unquestionably, an ability to manipulate rainfall was highly valued, since both the lack and excess of water made similar impacts, albeit by different means, due to the absence of any irrigation or storage systems.

During dry summers, the scarcity of water created a heightened risk of starvation for all residents of the communities on the Orobian side of Valtellina where San Salvatore is located: the *alpeggi* would become overly dry, jeopardising the livestock being grazed. This would also bring about significant issues in the valley floor, where seasonal restrictions for any grazing activity accompanied agricultural use. On the contrary, extensive and prolonged rainfall could cause the Livrio - or Torchione - to swell, posing a dangerous threat of overflow and destruction to downstream households and fields. The

43 In relation to social and religious practices that did not conform to post-Tridentine dictates, which were articulated in sacred spaces dedicated to the dead in the region, such as cemeteries, read Della Misericordia, M., *Altari dei morti: spazio sacro, sepulture e celebrazione degli edificatori fra Basso Medioevo e prima Età Moderna (a partire da chiese alpine)*, in (a cura di), Arcangeli, L. & al. *Famiglie e Spazi Sacri nella Lombardia del Rinascimento*, Milano, Scalpendi editore, 2015 pp. 345 - 405

ritual of weather modification in the vicinity of the church of San Salvatore specifically concerns rainwater, and can be regarded as complementary to both irrigation systems and flood management strategies, if not even somewhat compensatory, given the fact that the community of Albosaggia, as well as the surrounding area, was lacking in both. It appears that the rituals documented herein were a last resort, in that they were not performed on a designated fixed date or any set calendar, but rather whenever necessary, during prolonged periods of drought or stormy weather. Therefore, they embody two distinct aspects of a unitary concern in the Alps: the need for an optimal amount of rainwater, on the one hand, for irrigation and, on the other, a need to avoid succumbing to landslides or floods. For these reasons, and since their dual functionality precludes them from being categorised as either rainmaking or fertility rites, they might be designated as *eco-rituals*.

The prefix *eco-* is employed in this sense to denote a ritualistic practice that is beneficial to an economy that is consonant with and subordinate to the principles of ecology. In this context, the term *eco-ritual* refers to a symbolic practice that aim to have a beneficial effect on the local ecosystem and, consequently, on the economic activities taking place in it and simultaneously to protect the community.⁴⁴

Finally, in this case, the concept of women's agency can be extended as a socially and culturally presumed capacity to influence meteorological conditions and obtain a well-balanced amount of rainfall. This ability exerted a dual influence, both ontological and existential, since it was believed to have an impact on the environment's equilibrium, a factor vital for the survival of entire communities. This implies that in a cultural world such as that of the Alps of the past, where the rural economy was embedded in society⁴⁵ and both developed within environmental limits imposed by topography and weather conditions, the *eco-ritual* of Albosaggia demonstrates that the role of women was considered crucial to the survival of the whole community, beyond their economic role, marital status, or reproductive status.

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⁴⁴ To better understand what the term *eco-ritual* signifies here, it may be helpful to delve into its etymological root: the Greek word *oikos*, meaning 'household.'

⁴⁵ Polanyi's critical concept of *embedded economy* describes a human society not economically and socially subordinated to the market and its values (See *The Great Transformation*, 1944).

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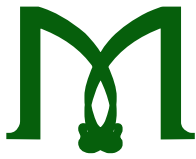
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Ehzele Laimbwe and Water Rituals in the North West Region of Cameroon

HENRY KAM KAH

Abstract

Water rituals are part of daily life in Cameroon's Western Grassfields in general and Laimbweland in particular. Women are connected with these rituals, which play an important role in fecundity and procreation, pacification of the living-dead, dissipation of malevolent spirits, witches and wizards, and treatment of ailments. In this article, I claim that water rituals of Ehzele Laimbwe in North West Cameroon serve vital socio-cultural and cosmological purposes by preserving culture, forestalling looming disaster, and cleansing the community of subverting evil spirits. Regrettably, the advent of Christianity and Western education, among other external influences, diminished participation, with only a portion of the population continuing to subscribe to these rituals cultural practices of old. Rituals are performed during crab and tadpole fishing, for birth and death, at the start of the dry season, during masquerade performances at funerals, and when there is imminent calamity. Employing the methodology of critical observation, discussion, oral interviews and analyzing available documents, I surmise that Ehzele Laimbwe rituals in Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas (Laimbwe villages) aptly serve these socio-cultural and cosmological



purposes. The socio-cultural challenges that Laimbwe face today are due, in part, to their non-respect for and lack of participation in these rituals.

Keywords: Cameroon, Laimbwe, ritual, performance, culture

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Résumé

Les rituels de l'eau font partie de la vie quotidienne dans les prairies occidentales du Cameroun en général et dans les terres de Laimbwe en particulier. Les femmes sont liées à ces rituels qui jouent un rôle important dans la fécondité et la procréation, la pacification des morts-vivants, la dissipation des esprits malveillants, des sorcières et sorciers et le traitement des maladies. Dans cet article, nous affirmons que les rituels de l'eau des Ehzele Laimbwe (les femmes) dans le nord-ouest du Cameroun ont servi des objectifs socioculturels et cosmologiques vitaux en préservant leur culture, en prévenant les catastrophes éventuelles et en nettoyant la communauté des mauvais esprits. Malheureusement, l'avènement du christianisme et de l'éducation occidentale, entre autres influences extérieures, ont rendu ces rituels superflus, seule une partie de la population adhérant à cette pratique culturelle ancienne. Des rituels étaient exécutés lors de la pêche au crabe et aux têtards, lors de la mort, de la naissance, du début de la saison sèche, durant des spectacles de mascarade lors des funérailles et en cas de calamité imminente. En employant la méthodologie de l'observation critique, de la discussion, des entretiens oraux et de l'analyse des documents disponibles, nous supposons que les rituels Ehzele Laimbwe à Baisoo, Bu et Mbengkas (villages Laimbwe) ont bien servi ces objectifs socioculturels et cosmologiques. Les défis socioculturels auxquels les gens sont confrontés aujourd'hui sont dus en partie au fait qu'ils ne respectent plus ces rituels et n'y participent plus.

Mots-clés : Cameroun, Laimbwe, rituel, performance, culture

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Introduction

This article analyses water-related rituals associated with the lives of women among the little-known matrilineal Laimbwe ethnic group of the North West Region of Cameroon.¹ The paper approaches this topic through a matricultural lens by portraying the cultural system of the Laimbwe as it is perceived, constructed, and lived by its women and understood by the people and other matricultural societies in the world.² The paper shows how, historically, such rituals served several socio-cultural and cosmological purposes in Laimbwe, most centrally as a means of achieving and maintaining social cohesion. Specifically, the rituals were associated with: increasing fecundity and reproduction, pacifying the spirits of the ancestors or the living-dead, dissipating malevolent spirits, confronting witchcraft, healing the sick, and preserving culture.³

In this article, I argue that the advent of the Basel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic Missions in Laimbweland in the early twentieth century, as well as other changes such as Western education, negatively impacted adherence to these rituals as realistic solutions to people's problems. However, while the rituals have become less appealing to some Laimbwe people, many do still practice them today. Therefore, there is a need to theorize about them in a new, more complex context where they have to co-exist with competing Christian cosmologies. Such debates have been recorded elsewhere in rural Africa.⁴ By using a matricultural lens, which foregrounds the perspective of women, to analyze these rituals in Laimbwe society, my research brings fresh insights to two key debates in studies of African rural society: first, the emergence of hybrid cosmologies and their significance for ritual practices in the present⁵ and, second, the changing role of women in these

1 Henry Kam Kah, "Women as Makers of History: The Kelu Women Movement in Bu, North West Cameroon 1957-59," *Castalia: Ibadan Journal of Multidisciplinary and Multi-Cultural Studies* 17, 1 (2004): 12-40; Henry Kam Kah, "Leadership Fuss in Bu Fondom, North West Province, Cameroon, 1942- 2001," *Epasa Moto: A Bilingual Journal of Letters and the Humanities*, 3:2 (2008): 161-186; Ndo Muam, *Traditional Structures and Political Evolution: A Case Study of Bu Chieftdom* (Bamenda: Quality Printers, 2001).

2 Irene Wiens Friesen Wolfstone, *ReMembering Matricultures: Historiography of Subjugated Knowledges, An Independent Study*, Unpublished paper. <https://www.academia.edu/37336416/>; Marie-Françoise Guédon, "Introduction," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1, 1 (2020): 3-7.

3 The living-dead are deceased members of the family who are known to continue living after death in order to protect the people always.

4 Mario I. Aguilar, "African Conversion from a World Religion: Religious Diversification by the Waso Boorana in Kenya," *Africa* 65, 4 (1995): 525-544; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman," *CrossCurrents* 47, 4 (1997-1998): 493-504.

5 Sven Ouzman, "Cosmology of the African San People," *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin, 644-650 (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2008).

cultures.⁶ These fresh insights centralize the commanding power of women in performative rituals, despite vying cosmologies and manipulative activities by witches and wizards; this power shows the resilience of a cultural practice transforming rural society.

In order to prove that women-related rituals in Laimbweland serve an important socio-cultural and cosmological significance, my methodology centres upon discussions with the women and men who personally perform and live the experience of these water-based rituals. Interviews were also conducted with adherents of the Christian religion who oppose the use of these rituals as a means of addressing the socio-cultural and cosmological needs of Laimbwe people. The observation method was also employed, especially in Bu village, the largest and principal; Bu village has experienced external influences more than Baisso and Mbengkas, which are situated mainly within the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve.⁷ The discussions, observations, and interviews spanned several years. The first period was intermittently between 2007 and 2008 during field research for my PhD thesis on gender and matrilineality among the Laimbwe people of Cameroon. Other discussion sessions followed in 2016 and 2023. Due to the prevailing Anglophone Crisis (also known as the Ambazonia War) in Cameroon since 2016, some of the discussions were through phone conversations because of the risk of travelling to the field. I also relied on a research assistant throughout the period of research.

During research, I consulted primary and secondary sources. Primary sources, gleaned specifically to understand the functioning of the Laimbwe matrilineal system and accompanying rituals, included archival documents, discussions, and interviews with individuals focusing on the importance of rituals in their daily lives. These sources provide a wealth of information that was useful in understanding the importance of rituals in the socio-cultural and cosmological life of the Laimbwe people of Cameroon. The target of my secondary sources was information about the nature and functions of the matrilineal kinship system as it operates in other parts of Africa and the world. These sources were also selected to explore the importance of ritual in the lives of people across the world. The aim was to establish similarities with the Laimbwe matrilineal system in terms of functions and challenges and to learn how ritual shapes several aspects of people's lives in different parts of the world. Rituals are relevant in the world today just like in the past; as with other societies, the Laimbwe people believe in the power of their rituals.

A brief exposition of ritual is merited here. Due to the importance of rituals in socio-cultural and political domains, this has led to the establishment of ritual studies in

6 Diedre L. Bádéjò, "African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent," *Research in African Literatures* 29, 2 (1998): 94-111; Winifred Uche Obasi, *From Shrines to Prayer Houses: A Religious History of Igbo Women, 1900-1970* (PhD Thesis, Michigan State University, 2013).

7 This reserve was created by the British colonial administration in 1951.

academic institutions across the world. A variety of ethnic groups in Africa perform rituals during festivals, circumcision, rites of passage, rainmaking, child birth, crop cultivation, harvesting, and masquerade performances. These are important because they create, maintain, and transform the worlds of human beings much more than has generally been assumed. Their actions speak to complex cultural and social processes which usually vary in intention, content, and context.⁸ As a result, it is not always appropriate to generalize about them since they are complex and address issues that are also complex in nature.

The performance of rituals may lead to social cohesion, perhaps even bringing a peaceful reconciliation of quarrelling people. Among the Komijan of Iran, for example, when drought leads to a shortage in subsurface water, religio-symbolic water-sprinkling rituals are performed to appeal to Allah for a return to normalcy and the freshness of life.⁹ Rituals may also strengthen systems of hierarchical order which express power relations between social classes, generations, and sexes, and this is the case with the *Ehzele* Laimbwe water rituals. On the other hand, ritual performances may also lead to questioning the cultural *status quo* or system that they embody.¹⁰ This is because ritual activity is usually a monologue which does not give room for people to raise questions or doubts in the formal setting.

The Laimbwe ethnic group is based in three principal villages, namely, Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas, whose inhabitants speak Laimbwe, pidgin, and English languages. Some Laimbwe people moved to French-speaking regions of Cameroon; they also speak French but they are few in number. Bu is located in the Menchum Division of the English-speaking North West region of Cameroon, while Baisso and Mbengkas are located in Boyo Division of the same region. Prior to the creation of Boyo Division in 1992, all of Laimbwe was located in Menchum Division. In 1960s, at the time of the independence and reunification of Cameroon, the population of Bu, Mbengkas, and Baisso was, respectively, 1118 people, 530 people, and 185 people; the total population of the ethnic group was 1833 people. By 1979, the population of Bu had risen to 6944 people and for Mbengkas it was 1978 people (statistics for 1979 Baisso are unavailable). The total population of Bu and Mbengkas that year was 8922 people, excluding Baisso. In 1993, the estimated population of Baisso was 685 -- 500 people more than at independence and reunification.¹¹ Current population

8 Christoph Wulf, ed., "Introduction," *Ritual and Identity: The Staging and Performing of Rituals in the Lives of Young People*, trans. Alice Lagaay and Elizabeth Hamilton (London: The Tufnell Press, 2010), Vii.

9 Mohammad Aref and Vahid Golestan, "Morphology of Intact Rituals of Water-Sprinkling of Human on Nature and Human on Human in Iran," *American Journal of Scientific Research* 92 (2013): 38.

10 Ibid.

figures are unavailable, but the number of people has continued to rise dramatically, pointing to greater numbers in the future.

The Laimbwe kinship system is a matrilineal one. Although an uncommon kinship system when compared with patrilineal kinship systems, it still survives in all major regions of the world, and this is what obtains among the Laimbwe people, with some variation.¹¹ Their kinship system, like others similar to it, is built on consanguinity with a woman (blood relationships traceable to a woman).¹² Through blood ties, brothers and sisters of the same mother are consanguineous. Other people who form an integral part of this consanguineous relationship are the mothers' brothers and sisters, children of sisters, grandmothers, and grandmother's children's children. Every member of this kinship system pays allegiance to the women because of blood relationships. This blood relationship invariably binds kin members together as brothers and sisters, mother and children, mother's brothers, and sister's sons and daughters within a common destiny.

This paper is divided into five main parts, the first one being this introduction; here I have stated what this paper is about and how the research was conducted to support the argument. I also introduced some common characteristics of the Laimbwe people and the importance of rituals within academia. I briefly discussed the Laimbwe matrilineal system and the centrality of women to such a system. In the second part of the paper, the concept of ritual and its relevance to this article on *Ehzele* Laimbwe is shown. This is followed by a brief survey of women-centric and woman-related rituals in Cameroon, to provide the regional context, while the fourth section focuses on *Ehzele* Laimbwe and the importance of rituals in their socio-cultural and cosmological lives. The fifth and final section, apart from the conclusion, addresses challenges brought about by Christianity, Western education, and other external influences.

Understanding Matriculture as a Concept and in the Context of this Study

Several studies have been carried out on the concept of matriculture as found in different cultures. Among the exponents of this concept is Irene Friesen Wolfstone, who contends that matricultures are societies centered on mothers and governed according to maternal

11 Clare Janaki Holden, Rebecca Sear, and Ruth Mace, "Matriliny as Daughter-Biased Investment," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 24 (2003): 100; Alexander Boyle, "Matrilineal Succession in the Pictish Monarchy," *The Scottish Historical Review* 56, 161 (1977): 1.

12 T.O. Beidelman, *The Kaguru: A Matrilineal People of East Africa* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Philip O. Nsugbe, *Ohaffia: A Matrilineal Ibo People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Karla O. Poewe, *Matrilineal Ideology: Male-Female Dynamics in Luapula, Zambia* (London: Academic Press, 1981); Joke Van Reenan, *Central Pillars of the House: Sisters, Wives and Mothers in a Rural Community in Minangkabau, West Sumatra* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, The Netherlands, 1996).

values, including care-taking and meeting needs. Such are the ethical principles which guide the actions of men and women, mothers and not-mothers. Wolfstone further argues that such societies are socially egalitarian and the mode of governance is by consensus. In cosmological narratives of these societies, the procreative and narrative abilities of women are interwoven in the thought and action of the people. There is usually an assumed reciprocal relationship between land and culture in what has come to be known as Harraway's concept of nature cultures.¹³

The concept has been further developed by Marie-Françoise Guédon. She argues that the term 'matricultural system' may be used to understand those parts or components of culture that help to sustain, express, and welcome the participation of women in the socio-cultural fabric, whether this is a matrilineal kinship system or not. She further argues that wherever the matricultural system is strong and womanhood plays a central role, or where all genders have a common enterprise, there is a matricultural society.¹⁴

Matriculture in the sense in which Wolfstone and Guédon have conceptualized it denotes a society where women's voices are part of the socio-cultural life of the people in a manner that cannot be dissociated or excluded from the functioning of the society. Although Wolfstone describes a matricultural society as egalitarian in nature, Guédon notes that this is not always the case.

Among the Laimbwe people, women have a lot of influence in socio-cultural activities such as the celebration of the dead, the organization of festivals, and the mobilization of families for larger cultural rituals which renew society and resolve lingering problems that can disturb the peace of the community. They are honoured for their connecting role between the worlds of the living and the living-dead through procreation, cleansing rituals, and agricultural activities. It is true that women and men in the Laimbwe ethnic group are involved in a common enterprise as presented by Guédon because they collaborate to keep alive the community's values of conviviality, socialization, support for one another, and protection of the culture of the people.

While the concept and practice of ritual has also received scholarly attention, there is, however, no general agreement on the meaning of ritual and research on it is fragmented. This is because each discipline is trying to stick to its own disciplinary boundaries rather than blur these boundaries to achieve a greater understanding of the concept. Although Leach argues that there is wide disagreement on how the word 'ritual' should be used and

¹³ Wolfstone, 5.

¹⁴ Guédon, 6-7.

how its performance should be understood,¹⁵ he surmises that the concept denotes all sets of behaviour that are culturally defined as such.¹⁶ While Leach links ritual to culture, Zuesse asserts that ritual is a conscious and voluntary symbolic bodily action.¹⁷ Gerholm, on the other hand, contends that ritual is the traditional expression and sustenance of a socially shared code or system.²⁰ In spite of differences in their conceptualization of ritual, all three authors are agreed that it involves some form of action and result. While Leach talks about sets of behaviour, Zuesse emphasizes form of action, and Gerholm relates ritual to expression and sustenance. In summary, it would be fair to say that ritual, as understood in the sense of these three scholars, is a purposefully repeated action with results that convince.

Water rituals that involve the *Ehzele* Laimbwe in Cameroon are conscious actions on people and the environment to heal, avert a calamity, resolve a problem, and preserve a cherished culture. The rituals are in the hearts of the people, while certain individuals and institutions are at the center of the action. There is always action from a number of stakeholders, both overt and covert.

Other authors like Olanrewaju Isiak Balogun reflect on the concept of ritual, contending that a ritual is a means of communication between the spirit and physical worlds.¹⁸ Supporting this view, James W. Turner argues that the object of the ritual among the Kava people is to communicate with the supernatural.¹⁹ These two scholars agree that ritual is communication between people and their supernatural environment. That is, the living perform physical actions which enable the spiritual to commune with the physical; the world of the living meets with that of the spirit, which gives meaning to ritual. Benjamin C. Ray adds to this view when he argues that ritual is “a way of communicating with the divine for the purpose of changing the human situation,”²⁰ Eliade further argues that ritual is a re-enactment of sacred prototypes, the repetition of the action of divine beings or mythical ancestors. The common denominator for these scholars is that ritual is communication to beings in different forms, including the divine or spiritual, mythical and supernatural.

15 Barbara Boudewijnse, “The Conceptualization of Ritual: A History of its Problematic Aspects,” *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 11 (1995): 32.

16 Ibid., 33.

17 Ibid., 34.

18 Olanrewaju Isiak Balogun, “Exploring the Theatrical Elements of Lisabi Festival of the Egba People in Abeokuta, Nigeria,” *EDE: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, 2 (2020): 23.

19 James W. Turner, ““The Water of Life:” Kava Ritual and the Logic of Sacrifice,” *Ethnology* 25, 3 (1986).

20 Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religion: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, 1976), 78.

Water rituals for and with the women (*Ehzele*) of Laimbwe are channels of communication involving the people, their environment, and supernatural and /or divine beings, enacted with the goals of promoting fecundity, valorizing culture, and dissipating malevolent spirits. Communication takes place between the Priest(ess), the spiritual world, and the family of those calling for the organization of the ritual; communication of traditional knowledge also occurs among members of the matrilineage, including children. Various verbal and non-verbal communications take place, disseminating information as appropriate for every member of the family or community.

Discussions around rituals have also been grouped into the intellectualist and symbolist approaches. Intellectualists describe ritual as a type of rational behaviour that is based on explanatory principles. Symbolists, on the other hand, do not subscribe to this view of rational behaviour and explanatory principles. They argue that while some ritual performances involve rational speech, this speech might not necessarily be accompanied by an explanation but, rather, operate on the symbolic level. Frits Staal, meanwhile, condemns the arguments of pure intellectualists and symbolists both as not explaining rituals at all. According to him, rituals are expressive behaviour which communicate certain meanings, especially about social structure, coded in symbolic language.²¹ This conceptual definition is the most accurately concerning *Ehzele* Laimbwe water-related rituals, as the use of symbolic language communicates and contributes to understanding the socio-cultural and cosmological life of the Laimbwe people. The Priest(ess) acts and speaks in such a way during ritual performance in order to address specific issues, such as promoting child-bearing or preventing evil spirits from causing the death of a newborn baby.

Generally speaking, these approaches and conceptual definitions of ritual are, in a certain sense, related to understanding the use of water in rituals which are related to women and - at times - men, among the Laimbwe people of Cameroon. Laimbwe rituals are culturally defined, with their own specificities, and this is partially in line with the postulation of Leach. Culturally speaking, therefore, rituals among the Laimbwe people are determined by custom and the traditions of the people, which explains why people attached significant meaning to them in the past, before the advent of the Christian religion in the area, and why some continue to do so.

Related to what Zuesse asserts, although rituals among the Laimbwe were mostly a voluntary and conscious exercise, some of them were not voluntary. That is, every

21 Cited in Jesper Sorensen, "Ritual as Action and Symbolic Expression," in *Genre and Ritual: The Cultural Heritage of Medieval Rituals*, E. Ostrem, M.B Bruun, N.H Petersen and J. Fleischer (eds), 41. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005).

member of the family was bound by tradition to participate knowingly and / or unknowingly. The Laimbwe people also believed that rituals brought the physical and spiritual worlds into a symbiotic relationship. The place of ritual performance, the instruments used, and the incantations uttered - all provided room for perfect communion between these two worlds. When some people embraced other values and no longer saw the importance of these rituals, they withdrew their participation, but traditional rituals remain significant in the socio-cultural life of many Laimbwe people.

Women and Water Rituals in Cameroon History

The importance of ritual in the socio-cultural life of a people is not limited to the Laimbwe people and this part of the paper demonstrates the importance of women-centered rituals for other ethnic groups of Cameroon. Among the Bomboko of Fako Division, for example, women perform a river ritual known as *Liwangi bakundu* around catchment areas. This ritual requests spiritual intervention to enhance fertility and childbirth. *Sango y a bando*, the leader of the ritual or mediator, talks directly to the spirits while women collect a white stone or Calabar chalk from the water catchment and rub their bodies with it as they walk along the water course at night.²² This ritual is important in the socio-cultural life of the Bakweri people because procreation is important in the regeneration of society.

Still in Fako Division, this time among the Bakweri, another ritual performance involves pregnant women and water. After the *Nganga* or medicine man is paid for performing the ritual, the pregnant woman's mother pours water into a clay pot containing a knotted rope and the pregnant woman is asked to loosen these knots. Later on, both the pregnant woman and her mother place the pot on a fire. After removing this pot from the fire, the pregnant woman throws cold water on one of the three stones in the hearth before reusing them. This was the *lilale* or smashing ritual, performed for a woman when she is three months pregnant.²³ Since water is central to the completion of this ritual, it serves an important cultural value to the people, especially as far as procreation and survival are concerned.

Elsewhere, women play a cutting-edge role in rituals associated with water and or the use of it. In Mayo Kari in the Adamawa Plateau of Cameroon, a male circumcision ritual involves a filtered mixture of corn cob ashes with water.²⁴ Water is indispensable in this ritual activity because the corn cob ashes are mixed with water to perform the ritual. The

22 Ayonghe Akonwi Nebasifu and Ngoindong Majory Atong, "Discourses of Cultural Continuity among the Bakweri of Mount Cameroon National Park," *Culture and Local Governance/Culture et gouvernance locale* 6, 2 (2019): 116.

23 Babila Mutia, "Performer, Audience, and Performance Context of Bakweri Pregnancy Rituals and Incantations," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 177 (2005): 222-223.

importance of circumcision to the people is demonstrated by considering anyone who does not complete this ritual as an 'incomplete person,' so to speak. Elsewhere, during the fattening and seclusion period of a Yamba girl in the North West Region of Cameroon in preparation for marriage, she is given a bathe daily with water and rubbed with camwood.²⁵ This is to smoothen her skin and prepare her for her husband's acceptance of her as his wife. The people value marriage and do everything possible for women to go through this experience and happily get married.

Through water rituals like these, one can understand the agency of women in several Cameroon communities. This agency has not been given the attention that it deserves. African women help to stabilize communities during social strife between families through rituals, including water rituals. This was especially so because fecundity is very central to the African life-world, as it links families and ensures regeneration of society. Again, women's agency in ritual activities - especially those that are performed at the hearth - shows how powerful they are in controlling the hearth from where comes food to feed and sustain lives. The rituals performed on them or on behalf of them has a strong connecting link between the world of the living and that of the living-dead. Many ancestors reveal themselves to women due to the uniting role they play in families and communities. Water rituals do not only serve an important socio-cultural purpose among other ethnic groups but also among the Laimbwe people and the next section explores this closely.

Socio-Cultural and Cosmological Significance of Water Rituals among the Laimbwe

In this part of article, I examine the socio-cultural and cosmological significance of water rituals among the Laimbwe of Cameroon. The choice of rituals examined is informed by the centrality of the matrilineal lineage in the day-to-day activities of the people, the relationship that these rituals create between lineages, and the protection of the village. These rituals are presented in the order of their importance to family reunion and community mobilization, with the most important noted first. They also reveal the level of collaboration between male and female genders, their support for one another, and the role water or bodies of water play in connecting the supernatural and natural forces of the Laimbwe world.

24 Philip Leis, "Past Passages: Initiation Rites on the Adamawa Plateau (Cameroon)," *Ethnology* 50, 2 (2011): 172.

25 Hermann Gufler, "Yamba Marriage Systems: Spouses and Their Offspring between Protection and Affliction," *Anthropos* 90, 1/3 (1995): 94.

The ritual performed for the dead is to reunite them (the living-dead) with living members of the family. It provides an opportunity for the gathered family members to plead with deceased members for protection of the family, family regeneration through procreation, and the provision of food and bushmeat to wade off hunger. The ritual also brings together family members from far and near to renew their vows of belonging and commitment to the family. Often, the day fixed for this ritual is the traditional resting days of *Uto-oh Metscheh* for Bu village and *Uto-oh Iwei* for Mbengkas and Baisso villages. It is in rare cases that this ritual takes place on an ordinary day; this is to ensure that family members who do not live in the village have the time to arrive and perform this age-old tradition before returning to town. The ritual of *Itschugeh'pheh* (removal of feathers of the fowl or cock) and the washing of hands over the hearth or on the grave of the deceased are controlled by the *Zheh'abei* (male family head) and *Zheh'anduoh* (female head of the family, the mother of the family) of that family. Its solemnity and orderly performance are proof of the great attachment given to it by family members and onlookers. It reunites children, male, and female members of the family, reconciles those who have gone astray, and gives the family a sense of purpose and pride for the bond that exists between the living and the living-dead.

The funerary ritual involves male and female family members gathering on the grave early in the morning. The mourning period has spiritual relevance because it brings together the living and the living-dead. The *Zheh'anduoh* begins the ritual with either a *Kekungheh* in her hand (a bowl made of spear grass) or a *Bhuom* (calabash) containing grains of corn. From either the *Kekungheh* or *Bhuom*, she throws the grain on the grave three times and offers some words to the ancestors or the living-dead.²⁶ This direct communication to the living-dead intercedes with them on a number of issues, including family unity, procreation, and protection. After *Zheh'anduoh* throws the corn, the other female family members take turns to collect corn from the *Kekungheh* or *Bhuom* and throw it on the grave. The action of throwing grains of corn on the grave is to ensure regeneration of the family, for, when corn is planted, it decays before sprouting. The *Kekungheh* or *Bhuom* serves as a unifying presence because the Laimbwe people share food from them. In the *Kekungheh*, they gather corn flour from family members during funeral ceremonies, the leftover of which is shared among women at the end of the funeral. The *Bhuom*, on the other hand, is used to give water to people to drink and corn fufu (an important staple) is also prepared using it. Water is mixed with herbs in the *Bhuom* during most water rituals.

The *Zheh-abei* leads the second part of the ritual in honour of the dead. In his left hand, he holds a fowl or chicken and removes feathers from the bird three times, throwing them on the grave as well. Like the *Zheh'anduoh*, he speaks to deceased family members and

26 Henry Kam Kah, "The Laimbwe Ih'neem Ritual/Ceremony, Food Crisis, and Sustainability in Cameroon," *Journal of Global Initiatives* 10, 2 (2016): 59-60.

admonishes them to give the living more children, meat, food, and happiness. He also appeals to them to forestall any looming disaster, protect their own from malevolent spirits, witches, and wizards, and give them long life and prosperity.²⁷ Other male members of the family then gather on the grave to touch the fowl with both hands; after this, the fowl is given to young boys to roast. It is eaten with corn fufu. The fowl or chicken serves a useful socio-cultural importance among the Laimbwe people: it is used to gather and feed people and also to cleanse the land of evil spirits once its blood has been spilled. Women prepare dry meat, fish, or tadpoles, which are eaten with corn fufu.

The importance of these instruments and ritual performances in the socio-cultural life of the Laimbwe cannot be over-emphasized. In the cosmology of the Laimbwe people, the number 3 signifies *Wuai* (children), *Nyengui* (bushmeat), and *Kesiazheh* (food). Whenever this number appears in a ritual, the emphasis is on fecundity and the provision of bushmeat and food by the dead to feed the family. The Laimbwe people place a premium on this funeral ritual because they consider it very important to unite families and to provide their daily bread.²⁸ It is also used to call on ancestors to protect family members and bring them peace and harmony.²⁹ The throwing of corn and feathers on the grave and talking to them pacifies and enlists the spirits of living-dead members of the family.

One significant element of the funerary ritual is the use of water following the arrival of family members from other places. A woman who arrives at the village for the burial of a relation is treated to this water ritual: the *Zheh'anduoh* collects water in a *Bhuom* and the woman is asked to wash her hands over the grave of the deceased family member. This is to enable the deceased to take note of her arrival and her intention to honour his or her dead. She then washes her face three times and with each of these three times, she splashes water on her legs. This is done to receive blessings and guidance of deceased family members. Water purifies her from any evil spirits that might have accompanied her if she did not honour the dead loved one; it renews her strength and propels her to greater exploits for the good of the family.³⁰ Her coming is a moment of family reunion, maintaining unity and support of one another in joy or sadness.

A similar ritual is also performed by the *Zheh'anduoh* for young boys who are still dependants and attending school or learning a trade, although inside, at the hearth. While facing the door, a young boy is given water to wash his face and hands three times (like the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Henry Kam Kah, "Wuai, Kesiazheh, Nyengui:" History and Livelihood Challenges in a Cameroon's Montane Forest Reserve," *Economic and Ecohistory* XI, 11 (2015): 93-104.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Discussion with Susanna Mbong, Wonya-Mavio-Buea, 10 November 2023.

girl or woman), while throwing some of the water on the ground. The hearth is the source of life of the Laimbwe people; it is in the hearth that food is stored for future use. It is also in the hearth that some rituals are performed to connect with the living-dead: any such activity that takes place there invites the living-dead to enjoy the warmth of the hearth. Young boys throw a few coins on the ground for the gathered female elders to buy a condiment called *maggi*, which they share.³¹ In this ritual performance around the hearth, the *Ehzele* of Laimbwe generally call on deceased ancestors to protect the boy or young man from accident and to shower him with blessings of money. He is also advised to use money wisely and to protect the family's image.

The funeral rite also provides an opportunity to take all the tender children of the family to the grave two or three days after the burial for the same water ritual.³² Water is collected in a bowl by the *Zheh'anduoh* and these children are asked to wash their hands, faces and legs. This prevents them from bad dreams and teaches them to keep their cultural values, so that when they are older, they will not depart from them. It is also hoped that in washing their hands over the grave of the deceased individual, any of them with ailments will be healed and protected. The deceased of either sex is invoked to bestow blessing on these children and protect them from any harm that might befall them.

Another water ritual, one that concludes funeral ceremonies in Bu, is practiced during the *Mekwasuuh* masquerade performance and it involves men, women and children. While it is performed by the *Ehzem*, who owns the masquerade, its socio-cultural significance reaches into the entire community. This ritual performance is led by the *Keh'kam*, the leader of the *Mekwasuuh* masquerade; he carries water mixed with healing herbs in a *Keghei* (calabash) decorated with *Teh'sooh* (fibre) and *Tekreh* (robes) from the forest. The water with the healing herbs is splashed or sprinkled on the population by the *Keh'kam*. Women and girl children stand on one side of the compound turning their backs while men and boy children stand on the other side, facing the masquerade. This ritual wards off evil spirits and bad deeds, which may have been committed knowingly or unknowingly.³³ The greater significance of the ritual is that it does not permit people to go to the farm the following day; the farms are to be kept clean of evil spirits and if people go there the day after the ritual, crops will dry up. Only hunters may go and check their traps for game.³⁴ The plants mixed in the calabash are known by only a few initiated people. For this reason, evil forces are not able to weaken the potency of the ritual by making use of the same herbs for malicious reasons. The ritual assembles the villagers to wash them and protect

31 Ibid.

32 Discussion with Andreas Kom, Weisoo Quarter Bu, 18 December 2016.

33 Discussion with Moses Ngui, Frederick Wakai Kom and Ernest Ache, Kassa-Bu, 24 December 2008; Discussion with Prudentia Wabi, Mbengkas, 10 January 2009.

34 Discussion with James Ambei, Bafren-Bu, 8 August 2008.

them against death. It also forestalls any plans by evil people to continue causing death and pain in the community.

For the harmony of the family and community, protection of childbirth against trouble or difficult circumstances also becomes a priority. When a woman gives birth if such conditions are present, she is secluded at home for a month and during this period, she will neither farm, cook food, nor carry out laundry activities. This is done for her by her relations. On the appointed day, a ritual is organized and performed by the *Phe'ngang* (priest(ess)) to enable the new mother to leave the home. The ritual involves the *Phe'ngang* mounting an *Ikeng* (clay pot) on the left-hand side of the hearth with special creeping plants wrapped round the mouth of this pot and, also, white marks.³⁵ This *Ikeng* is filled with corn beer. Two shells of a gastropod (snail), one male and the other female, float in the *Ikeng*. *Tetua* (locally-made candles, pl.; *itua*, sing.) are lit and mounted on the mouth of the *Ikeng*. The syncretic ritual gives the nursing mother and her husband the opportunity to thank God that He heard their prayers and gave them a child. It also unites the whole community, as witnessing villagers pour corn beer on their palms as they take an oath of support for the couple and ask the spirits that they never go through a difficult time in their marital life.³⁶

This ritual performance concludes with a service of special food from a *Kekungheh*: a small loaf of corn fufu, sauce of oil and dried fish. The food is eaten with relish to ensure that the ritual ceremony is successful.³⁷ Evil or malevolent spirits within the community are appeased through this ritual of food. Serving as a communion to bind all present, Laimbwe culture is preserved. Through their massive attendance and participation, people come as witnesses to validate the solemn ritual to appease, thank, and appreciate all who played a role in bringing an end to pain in the family and community. Death of children at birth is to be a thing of the past and, especially, the birth of twins after difficulty in delivery makes the people dance and appreciate God through their ancestors. The mother and twins are adorned with creeping plants round their necks.³⁸ The culture of communalism is kept alive through the sharing of the contents of the *Ikeng*.

A woman who gives birth several times but the children all die may ask the *Phe'ngang* to organize a ritual to end this misfortune, when she has given birth to another child, in an effort to forestall the death of any of her future children. While consultations are

35 Discussion with Vincent Kpwa Kendang, Bu-Town, 23 December 2016.

36 Ibid.

37 Discussion with Andreas Kom.

38 Discussion with Tri Kendang, Bafren-Bu, 27 December 2007; Abel Ngai, Bafren-Bu, 17 August 2008.

underway to have this ritual organized, she is not allowed to do anything nor to go outside in the rain (she may be affected by impurities in the air if rain falls upon her). The priest/ess guides the woman to cut some grass at home and to throw it on the ground. This ensures that bad spirits walk on this grass, which will negatively affect them. It is thus a ritual to dissipate any evil spirits which may harm her ability to reproduce, as well as a source of assurance and re-assurance.

The home-based part of the ritual is followed by a journey of the woman with her newborn child to a nearby river or stream, carrying a bowl and clay pot on her head. The mother and her child stand in the middle of the stream or river and are bathed together by the *Phe'ngang*. The bowl contains corn fufu and fish steeped in palm oil; it is collected from her by the *Phe'ngang* and he or she throws some of the food to the south of the stream or river and some of it northwards. They do this while pleading the case of the woman to the ancestors, calling on them to intervene and stop the misfortune of the woman losing her children through death so soon after birth.³⁹ This completes the ritual by the *Phe'ngang*; feasting continues at home, as people eat and drink corn beer from the *Ikeng*.

Through the *Kuiifuai*, their male regulatory society, the people of Bu often collect water from a stream in the *Kezheh* grove at the start of the dry season for ritual purpose. Collected in the early hours of the morning, the water is from the *Ukwoazheh* family and he collects it while nude. The water is used to cleanse the village of impending ailments and forestall negative forces from causing disaster. The ritual activity is held in the *Bei Saghekeh* (compound where matters are judged and settled).⁴⁰ The gathering of the villagers at the *Bei Saghekeh* drink from the calabash in order to fight against malevolent spirits and dry season ailments like cough. This ritual is a crowd puller; all roads lead to the *Bei Saghekeh* for boys, girls, men, and women. The ritual enhances respect for leaders, preempts impending health problems, and promotes culture, reconciliation, peace, and prosperity.

Proof of innocence is handled by a *Kuuuh* (sing.) / *Tekuuh* (pl.) ritual. Swearings take one of two forms; the first involves preparing a concoction of leaves from special plants squeezed in water. A *Phe'ngang* administers the concoction into the eyes of people who each declined responsibility for an act to show whether they are either innocent or guilty. The results are visible when the guilty party scratches his or her eyes as if pepper was put into them. The innocent party does not feel any pain and endures the ritual without any

³⁹ Discussion with Manfred Sei and Susanna Ekai, Mbengkas, 8 January 2009.

⁴⁰ Discussion with Hightime Kahghe Sah, 27 December 2007.

problem.⁴¹ This particular ritual is known as *Ikiakuuh*. It is administered to both men and women without distinction, for the duration of the matter in contention.

In the second swearing ritual, parties in disagreement each come with their fowls (still alive). Similar to the *Ikiakuuh*, appropriate plants are mixed with water and given to the fowls to drink. The person whose fowl dies after drinking the mixture is declared guilty of an offence. To have this ritual performed, most people from the Laimbwe villages travel to a road-side settlement known as Mbietai on the Wum-Bamenda highway, while some people go to other places in Kom, Esu and Menchum valleys. Fowls are used because if the concoction were given to people to drink, their guilt would lead to death.⁴² The one whose fowl dies from the beverage pleads for pardon and promises to mend his or her ways; some pay a heavy fine to the community. This ritual thus prevents looming disaster and also helps to clean the community of destructive spirits and individuals, while resolving conflict without violence among the people.

In a context which centralizes peace and prosperity, the Laimbwe people, like others in the western grassfields of Cameroon, use camwood and water to keep and propagate these products of social harmony. Both are also used by the people to heal the sick. During highly revered traditional weddings, young Laimbwe girls are bathed in water and rubbed with camwood; this preserves the sanctity of marriage from youth to old age. This ritual activity is organized to cleanse them of all impurities as they prepare to have life partners and perpetuate their matrilineal lineages or families through procreation; it also serves as a *rite de passage* into womanhood in the three main Laimbwe villages of Baisso, Bu and Mbengkas.⁴³ Elderly women are quite conscious of this inter-generational activity through which they communicate important messages of womanhood, such as responsible behaviour and care, to the next generation of women leaders in the communities.

Creeping plants squeezed in water are also used in family shrines to cure people of persistent ailments or to prevent these ailments from spreading through the community. Family and community members are given this concoction to drink and get well or to prevent them from contracting the ailments, and children are bathed with it. This important ritual in the health history of the Laimbwe is repeated at the beginning of every dry season to cushion the harsh health effects of the season and the disaster that would

41 Discussion with Andreas, Weisoo, Bu.

42 Discussion with Vida Wei Chou.

43 Henry Kam Kah, "Camwood (*Pterocarpus Tinctorius*) in the Political Economy of the Cross and Manyu Rivers Basin of Cameroon and Some Hinterland Communities, 1916-1961," *Afrika Zamani* 20 (2012): 151.

accompany it. Some of these leaves are wrapped on the necks of women and signify a renewal of Laimbwe society through the agency of women.⁴⁴

Water may also be used by insurgent women to defile the compounds of men who stand against them. They do this by moving into and urinating in the compounds; in extreme situations, the women defecate in the compounds.⁴⁵ Between 1957 and 1959, when women from Kom, Laimbwe, and other areas rose up against British colonial authorities and the indigenous institutions that supported them, Laimbwe women performed these rituals in the compounds of some stubborn men. These compounds were abandoned and left desolate, because women's urine frightened the owners away. Only a costly traditional cleansing ritual by notables enabled them to return.⁴⁶ On a positive note, years later the *Kelu* women (*Ehzele'ghalu*) – the former revolutionaries – also visited the defiled compound and bathed newborn babies with water and some special leaves. This was a purification rite which was meant to prevent evil forces from affecting them.⁴⁷

Decline in Ritual Activities

The decline in water-related ritual activities for *Ehzele* Laimbwe are a consequence of challenging and disruptive external influences. One of these was the advent of Christianity in Laimbwe country during the 1920s; the teachings of the Bible inspired some newly-Christian women to question the socio-cultural life of the Laimbwe people, especially ritual performances. Specifically, the Basel Mission made its way to Bu village in 1926 with the arrival of Catechist Fonto-oh Hiob (Job) from Nsem Bafut near Bamenda. The church eventually went on a collusion path with several aspects of tradition and custom of the Laimbwe people.

In one such instance, on 27 December 1964, the Pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Bu, Thomas Ngong Amaazee, together with a handful of elders of the church, including Victor Bo, Moses Nang, Abel Kpwai, Monica Mai, Susanna Wei and Elizabeth Ngei, acted against the Fon of Bu, Chu Mbonghekang and his council of elders, for indulging in “pagan” practices. In a petition signed by the Pastor and these elders, they argued that Bu village

44 Henry Kam Kah, “Feminist Activism, Economic Carte Blanche, Political Control, Symbol and Symbolism: A Historical Interpretation of the *Kelu* Women Revolution in Bu-Cameroon, 1957-59,” *Afrika Zamani* 17 (2009): 94-95.

45 Ibid., 95; Henry Kam Kah, “Women's Resistance in Cameroon's Western Grassfields: The Power of Symbols, Organization, and Leadership, 1957-1961,” *African Studies Quarterly* 12, 3 (2011): 76.

46 Ibid.

47 Henry Kam Kah, “Women as Makers of History: A Study of the *Kelu* Women Movement in Bu-Wum, Cameroon 1957-59,” *CASTALIA: Ibadan Journal of Multicultural/Multidisciplinary Studies* 17, 1 (2004): 28.

leadership was compelling Christians to join “pagan...juju societies” and also “drink pagan medicines according to old fashion.”⁴⁸ Some Christian adherents, in solidarity with the Pastor and his elders, preached or campaigned against Indigenous Laimbwe ritual activities. They aimed particularly at rituals associated with masquerade performances, child birth, and community cleansing, arguing that God was the solution to all problems and that these rituals served no real purpose.

Another reason for decline in these rituals is the construction of modern health centres in Laimbwe villages, notably in Bu and Mbengkas. In the past, *Ehzele* Laimbwe who gave birth relied exclusively on traditional birth attendants and pharmacopoeia. When there was need, a ritual was performed to welcome and protect any newborn child. The advent of modern medical facilities, like the health post in Bu, for example, in the 1970s and then its development into a health centre with resident nurses, have turned the attention of some people towards this style of medicine and away from rituals to heal the sick. Many women give birth in the health centre and those who might have delivered at home, they are taken to these medical facilities for medical attention.⁴⁹ Some Christian families are especially cool towards consulting the *Phe'ngang* for a protection ritual for the mother and newborn baby, thanks to the Western education that they have acquired. With it, they believe only in the curative power of the health establishment.

In addition, those who can perform these rituals have become fewer and cannot meet the demand to heal the sick and purify the land.⁵⁰ Some Priest(esses) have died without preparing others to succeed them, some have converted to Christianity and renounced the Indigenous rituals as a solution to their health problems, and some of the Priest(esses) have been taken to the towns and cities when they aged, to live and be cared for by their relations living there.⁵¹ There is a general dearth in the number of people able to perform rituals, such as those concerning child birth or village cleansing. A few charlatans today demand money and other material wealth in exchange for their performance; this is unprecedented and has made more people lose faith in rituals as a solution to their socio-cultural problems. This monetization of communal rituals contributes to the lack of interest in participating among some Laimbwe women.

48 Henry Kam Kah and Eric Kangha Chu, “Education, Preservation, and Transformation in a Cameroonian Polity,” *Lefem: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Transformation Education A Publication of St. Monica University Higher Institute Buea* 1, 1 (2023): 52.

49 Discussion with Rebecca Sih Dan, Bafren-Bu, 12 April 2023.

50 Discussion with Vincent Kpwa Kendang.

51 Ibid.

Migration has also contributed to the decline of these water-related rituals in Laimbweland. The commodification of agriculture, especially plantation agriculture, has led to a movement of young people from Laimbwe to the coastal region of Cameroon to seek employment there. Although they occasionally come home to commune with their kith and kin, this movement out of the village interrupts the transmission of these older cultural practices. Many young people who work in these plantations or in restaurants away from their home villages have accepted alien ideas and will not give their full attention to the necessity of performing these rituals.⁵² The gap created in the propagation of culture explains why these young and mobile people prefer to use their money to consult a specialist for their psycho-social and health challenges in the towns, rather than returning to the village to subscribe to these water rituals. It is, however, worth noting that some people continued to go home for these rituals but the number has diminished.

Continuing Relevance of these Rituals

Negative forces against these water related rituals notwithstanding, there are still *Ehzele* Laimbwe who tenaciously cling to rituals as a means of averting looming disaster and for protection. For example, people who become conscious of the fact that they may be compelled to prove their innocence decide not to foment problems that can create division and destruction.⁵³ The fear of open disgrace and of enduring pain when subjected to the *Kuuh* ritual in public has made some people become responsible and avoid wrong doing. Those who want a just society have also decided to subscribe to this ritual performance as an effective way of solving lingering problems such as theft and witchcraft. They encourage others to do same, to cleanse Laimbwe society of trouble-makers.

Other Laimbwe people still believe that rituals for nursing mothers enable them to carry out household chores and work on the farm. They believe that this serves several useful purposes. One is that such rituals unite the family and mobilize villagers to commune with one another, share experiences, heal wounds, and bring about peace. They argue that these rituals offer families that rare moment of giving gratitude to God for the gift of children, kindness, and for His love for them. Childbearing is at the heart of the culture and belief system of the Laimbwe people.⁵⁴ The fertility of women guarantees regeneration and the renewal of matrilineal lineages, and the rituals promote reconciliation between people and strengthen family unity. The mobilization which accompanies ritual activity

⁵² Discussion with Ngowei Moses, Likomba-Tiko, 17 July 2022.

⁵³ Discussion with Ndong Eric Kubuh, Bafren-Bu, 23 December 2016.

⁵⁴ Discussion with Prudencia Kai Wanjū, Jennet Ngwa, Rebecca Ngoi, Agnes Zei, Susana Wei, Mbengkas, 15 August 2007.

makes Laimbwe people honour their communal values, which may be described as “All for one and one for all.’

The rituals performed on graves of deceased persons continue to be popular among the Laimbwe because it is a form of direct communication between the living and the living-dead (ancestors who passed on but who continue to linger and protect their people). Through these ritual prayers of intercession are offered for family members who are away from home. The Laimbwe people have strong faith in intercession by their ancestors and their rituals places significant emphasis on this. Also, during the ritual on the grave, important lessons of life are passed down from elderly women and men to the younger generation of girls and boys. This is done to ensure continuity so that when the elders are gone, the baton of command will be safe in the hands of the young.⁵⁵

Through the various water rituals, lessons of traditional pharmacology and the Indigenous knowledge system of the Laimbwe are transmitted by custodians of the herbs and barks used in these rituals. This is important because some ailments like side pain⁵⁶ are effectively treated using traditional herbs.⁵⁷ Due to harsh economic realities, there is a growing interest in Indigenous medicine and some of these rituals are regaining their popularity, becoming more relevant and useful to the people. A cross-section of the population continues to believe that the core cultural values of the Laimbwe people need to be preserved and, in some cases, revived. Those that are near extinction should be resuscitated for the collective good of the people.

Finally, many scholars and students show great interest in the documentation of cultural and ritual practices of the Laimbwe and other nearby people through research projects in institutions of higher learning in Cameroon and elsewhere.⁵⁸ Cultural festivals and other related activities featuring these rituals represent the people involved, which may help people from other places in learning from these cultural values. Although expensive, such activities are valuable because they recapture a ritual life that preserves culture, averts looming disaster, and cleanses Laimbweland of evil spirits.

Conclusion

⁵⁵ Discussion with Rtd Rev. Simon Muam Asang, Mbulom-Bu, 5 August 2008.

⁵⁶ This is a persistent and troubling pain at the side of the stomach. It could be on the left or right side.

⁵⁷ Discussion with Emmanuel Towah Ndong, Bu-Town, 10 October 2023.

⁵⁸ Discussion with Walter Gam Nkwi, Buea, 13 July 2023.

In this paper, I have shown that women's water-related rituals among the Laimbwe of Cameroon serve a variety of socio-cultural and cosmological purposes. This is not only limited to *Ehzele* Laimbwe, because other African communities experience this. As long as these rituals are performed when needed, they contribute to the preservation of the people's rich culture, avert looming disaster, and cleanse the community of malevolent spirits. This study is placed within a general framework of matricultural studies as they obtain in other parts of the world and applied to the Laimbwe ethnic group in Cameroon. I have shown in the paper that women or mothers relationship with water places them largely at the centre of Laimbwe society through ritual activities and in caring for the needs of the society. The rituals that are organized in honour of them bring people and resources together to feed the teeming population that participate in these rituals. In fact, women's agency is great, and they play a central role in Laimbweland.

The role of women in Laimbweland is closely related to what Wolfstone has said of matricultural societies in Canada and other parts of the world. What makes this study different is that, although Wolfstone's theory emphasizes the socially egalitarian nature of matricultural societies, this has not always been the case concerning the ritual life of the Laimbwe. Instead, particularly with respect to rituals concerning childbirth and purification, women pull the strings and command more power covertly and overtly.

The study has also shown that the water-based rituals of *Ehzele* Laimbwe express and sustain ritual systems similar to what Guédon has said of other matricultural systems. The study has shown that, in as much as the male and female gender in Laimbwe have a common enterprise, there are specific rituals activities that are led by men and others led by women. The Laimbwe matrilineal system is built around women to such an extent that their influence in Laimbwe socio-cultural activities is not in doubt. They are always there to push men to action, as well as regulate and even control their behaviour. Even after conversion into the Christian religion, some *Ehzele* Laimbwe continue to shape the life of their community through their pointed interventions during ritual performance. The men who perform these rituals do so to please and not to displease these women.

Women's agency in Africa can also be understood through the lens of ritual activity, based on the discussion in this paper. The introduction of Christian evangelism, which was in conflict with Indigenous cosmological beliefs, saw women play a dual role in this hybridization of cosmological views. Many new converts were women who embraced Christian doctrine but paradoxically, remained adherents of the Indigenous religious beliefs. Their agency is found in the adaptation, re-adaptation, and internalization of other cosmological aspects of the African world-view. The fact that Christian and traditional rituals exist side by side in the Laimbwe villages of Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas show the dynamism of African women to embrace change and keep tradition.

Through traditional rituals, *Ehzele* Laimbwe are at the center of maintaining their cultural values, such as blessing, peace, stability, and the destruction of malevolent spirits, even when adopting Christianity's dissimilar practices and beliefs. If Laimbwe society today continues to see the relevance of their Indigenous rituals, it is thanks to the adaptive capability of their women. This has been brought out in this paper. When assessed through their water-based rituals, the Laimbwe matricultural system is similar to other matricultural systems in very many respects but also different in some unique characteristics. This study has examined all of these within a broader context of social change, changing gender roles, and the relevance or irrelevance of rituals to solving the problems of the Laimbwe people. The prevailing situation is therefore a hybrid one pointing again to adaptation, re- daptation, resilience, and refusal.

About the Author

Henry Kam Kah holds a PhD in History from the University of Buea, Cameroon, and has over twenty-five years of teaching experience there. The area of research interest includes slavery, provenance, gender, conflict and culture. Professor Kah has several scholarly papers, book chapters and a co-edited book to his credit.

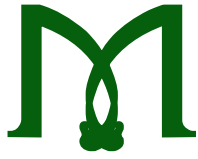
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Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

<https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix>

Odenabe (the river that beats like a heart) Watershed

JESSICA MARION BARR



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Artist's Statement

This piece revises and re-'maps' the watershed around Nogojiwanong ('the place at the end of the rapids' in Michi Saagig Nishnaabemowin¹) or Peterborough, where I currently live, mother, teach, learn, and sometimes swirl in little eddies of research-creation. The river that flows through this territory is the Odenabe (Otonabee), "the river that beats like a heart."² I have such gratitude and love for this beautiful and strong water body, in whom I have enjoyed swimming and playing with my child many times and who is so important to this place -- and who persists despite the ongoing damages of settler-colonial deforestation, damming, the mills that caused so much harm, and the effects of corporate water pollution. I created this piece by respectfully gathering aquatic plants that were floating by the banks of the river near Trent University, simmering them with a small amount of river water to make an ink, and then drawing and painting a depiction of this watershed based on a projection sourced from native-land.ca. Using gold paint from Beam Paints (an Anishinaabe-owned company based in M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island: www.beampaints.com/) I gently marked the spot where I had collected the plants. Nishinaabeg elders and water protectors such as Shirley Williams and Dorothy Taylor have shared the knowledge that water is the blood of Mother Earth. We are all co-constituted with the waters in our places. This piece attempts to offer a sort of heartfelt portrait --rather than a more colonially understood map-- of this territory, rendered with materials that are tangibly and deeply interconnected with the waters being depicted.

Medium: handmade ink made from Otonabee river aquatic plants on watercolour paper (24" x 36"), 2022

Déclaration de l'artiste

Cet œuvre d'art révisé et re-'cartographie' le bassin versant autour de Nogojiwanong (« le lieu au bout des rapides » en Michi Saagig Nishnaabemowin³) ou Peterborough, où je vis, maternelle, enseigne, apprend et, parfois, tourbillonne dans de petits tourbillons de recherche-création. La rivière qui traverse ce territoire est l'Odenabe (Otonabee), « la rivière qui bat comme un cœur ».⁴ J'ai une telle gratitude et un tel amour pour ce plan d'eau magnifique et puissant, dans

1 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011), *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*, Arbeiter Ring Publishing: Winnipeg, MB, p. 26.

2 "The Otonabee runs through Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg territory from the river we call Zaagaatay Igiwan [Trent River] into Pimaadashkodeyong [Rice Lake]. [...] I asked my Elder Gdigaa Migizi what the word Otonabee means in Nishnaabemowin. He began by telling me that the first part means "heart," coming from the word *ode*; and the word *odemgat* means boiling water, because when water boils, it looks like the bubbling or beating of a heart. He then explained that Otonabee is an anglicized version of Odenabe -- the river that beats like a heart -- in reference to the bubbling and boiling waters of the rapids along the river" (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle's Back*, p. 93-94).

3 Simpson, p. 26.

4 L'Otonabee traverse le territoire nishnaabeg de Michi Saagig, depuis la rivière que nous appelons Zaagaatay Igiwan [rivière Trent] jusqu'au Pimaadashkodeyong [lac Rice]. [...] J'ai demandé à mon aîné Gdigaa Migizi ce

lequel j'ai souvent aimé nager et jouer avec mon enfant et qui est si important pour cet endroit - et qui persiste malgré les dommages continus causés par la déforestation coloniale, les barrages, les moulins qui ont causé tant de dégâts et les effets de la pollution de l'eau par les entreprises. J'ai créé cette œuvre en ramassant respectueusement des plantes aquatiques flottant sur les rives de la rivière près de l'Université Trent, en les faisant mijoter avec un peu d'eau de rivière pour en faire une encre, puis en dessinant et peignant une représentation de ce bassin versant à partir d'une projection provenant de native-land.ca. À l'aide de peinture dorée de Beam Paints (une entreprise anishinaabe basée dans la Première Nation M'Chigeeng sur l'île Manitoulin : www.beampaints.com/), j'ai délicatement marqué l'endroit où j'avais ramassé les plantes. Les aînés nishinaabeg et les protecteurs de l'eau, comme Shirley Williams et Dorothy Taylor, ont partagé le savoir que l'eau est le sang de la Terre Mère. Nous sommes tous co-constitués par les eaux de nos lieux. Cette œuvre tente d'offrir une sorte de portrait sincère – plutôt qu'une carte plus coloniale – de ce territoire, rendu avec des matériaux tangiblement et profondément interconnectés avec les eaux représentées.

Technique : encre artisanale réalisée à partir de plantes aquatiques de la rivière Otonabee sur papier aquarelle (61 x 91 cm), 2022

About the Artist: Jessica Marion Barr (she/her) is an artist, educator, researcher, and queer single mother of Scottish, English, Dutch, and matrilineal Haudenosaunee ancestry. Her interdisciplinary practice incorporates artmaking and arts-science research-creation, investigating creative, collaborative, queer, embodied/somatic, and Indigenous-led approaches to environmental issues and social/ecological justice. Her arts-practice-based Ph.D. in Cultural Studies at Queen's University focused on ecological elegies. Jessica has exhibited artwork across Canada, and has attended trainings and artist residencies nationally and internationally. An Assistant Professor at Trent University, she is cross appointed to the Cultural Studies Department and the Honours Bachelor of Arts and Science Program, and approaches her teaching and supervision with creativity, enthusiasm, and attentiveness to care and wellbeing.

Artist's URL: <https://www.trentu.ca/culturalstudies/faculty-research/undergraduate-faculty/jessica-marion-barr>

que le mot Otonabee signifiait en nishnaabemowin. Il a commencé par me dire que la première partie signifie « cœur », venant du mot ode ; et le mot odemgat signifie eau bouillante, car lorsque l'eau bout, elle ressemble au bouillonnement ou au battement d'un cœur. Il m'a ensuite expliqué qu'Otonabee est une version anglicisée d'Odenabe – la rivière qui bat comme un cœur – en référence aux eaux bouillonnantes et bouillonnantes des rapides qui la longent. (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle's Back*, p. 93-94, unofficial translation).



Fragile Items

GRETA CIŪNYTĖ



Artist's Statement

*"How great is what binds us,
How small is what separates us."*

– Greta Ambrazaitė, 'The Mouse of Blood' from *Fragile Items*
(not an official translation)

Water has always been more than an element to me, it also is a medium to my emotions as well as a bridge to a complex relationship between myself and my father. My childhood is awash with memories of him, always framed by water.

He teaches my brother and me to dive into a violet bathtub, its color deepened by potassium permanganate – a relic of post-Soviet childcare, meant to disinfect, to protect. Then, in another memory, he holds me in his lap as we sled down into the pool at a water amusement park by the Lithuanian seaside – laughter spilling like waves, mixing with panic, as only when we hit the water do I realize my feet cannot reach the bottom. And as the years passed, our endless summer road trips led us to every countryside lake we could find, where we swam through storms – the sky growling above us, the water cradling us below...

In those moments, I felt both fragile and infinite – adrift between fear and trust, between the depths of uncertainty and the surface of belonging. Yet, these tender recollections exist alongside others, where my father is often distant, his presence shadowed by an unreachable silence, his violent temper like sudden, crashing waves.

This photograph is an echo of that complex love – a hand reaching through water, a gesture where words failed us. Water became our language when none other would do, a space where we could soften, where we could meet.

Greta Ciūnytė

* * * * *

Déclaration de l'artiste

*« Comme ce qui nous lie est grand,
Comme ce qui nous sépare est petit. »*

Greta Ambrazaitė, 'La souris de sang' de « Objets fragiles »
[traduction non officielle]

L'eau a toujours été plus qu'un élément pour moi, c'est aussi un vecteur de mes émotions et un pont entre ma relation complexe et celle de mon père. Mon enfance est imprégnée de souvenirs de lui, toujours ancrés dans l'eau.

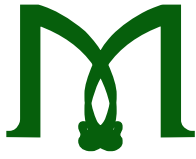
Il nous apprend à mon frère et moi à plonger dans une baignoire violette, dont la couleur est créée par le permanganate de potassium – une relique de la puériculture post-soviétique, destinée à désinfecter, à protéger. Puis, dans un autre souvenir, il me tient sur ses genoux tandis que nous descendons en luge dans la piscine d'un parc aquatique au bord de la mer lituanienne – le rire déferlant comme des vagues, mêlé à la panique, car ce n'est qu'en touchant l'eau que je réalise que mes pieds ne peuvent pas atteindre le fond. Et au fil des ans, nos interminables road trips estivaux nous ont menés vers tous les lacs de campagne que nous avons pu trouver, où nous avons nagé à travers les tempêtes – le ciel grondant au-dessus de nous, l'eau nous berçant en contrebas...

Dans ces moments-là, je me sentais à la fois fragile et infinie – à la dérive entre la peur et la confiance, entre les profondeurs de l'incertitude et la surface de l'appartenance. Pourtant, ces tendres souvenirs côtoient d'autres, où mon père est souvent distant, sa présence assombri par un silence inaccessible, son caractère violent comme des vagues soudaines et déferlantes.

Cette photographie est l'écho de cet amour complexe – une main tendue à travers l'eau, un geste là où les mots nous manquaient. L'eau est devenue notre langage quand aucun autre ne le pouvait, un espace où nous pouvions nous adoucir, où nous pouvions nous rencontrer.

Greta Ciūnytė

Artist's URL: <https://www.instagram.com/g.ciunyte/>



Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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The Finnish water mother Veen Emo

KAARINA KAILO



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Artist's Statement:

Veen Emo, the Mother Goddess of the Water world, with her many names (Vellamo, Vuotar, Äinemöinen) is associated in Finnish folklore with the oldest of healing ointments, undulating wavy lotions, the balmy balsams. Raising her knee from the sea world, she lets the golden eye, looking for a nest, circling over her, lay her eggs on her lifted knee, thus creating the world together with Ilmatar, Daughter of Air.

Medium: velvet, cotton, wool, tulle

* * * *

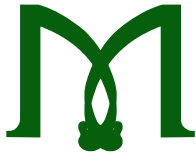
Déclaration de l'artiste :

Veen Emo, la déesse mère du monde de l'eau, avec ses nombreux noms (Vellamo, Vuotar, Äinemöinen) est associée dans le folklore finlandais à la plus ancienne des onguents curatifs, les lotions ondulées ondulantes, les baumes doux. Levant son genou du monde marin, elle laisse l'œil doré, en quête d'un nid, la survoler et y pondre ses œufs, créant ainsi le monde avec Ilmatar, Fille de l'Air.

Matériaux : velours, coton, laine, tulle

* * * * *

Artist's URL: <https://www.kaarinakailo.info/>



Review:

**Barbara Alice Mann and Kaarina Kailo,
*The Woman Who Married the Bear:
The Spirituality of the Ancient Foremothers*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023)**

CARLA IONESCU

Barbara Alice Mann and Kaarina Kailo's *The Woman Who Married the Bear* is a monumental exploration of ancient spirituality rooted in the relationship between women and bears. This interdisciplinary work boldly revisits the myths, traditions, and ecological wisdom of matristic societies, reframing these stories as foundational to understanding human interconnectedness with the natural world. Mann, a historian of Native American traditions, and Kailo, a scholar of feminist and ecological studies, blend their expertise to offer a compelling narrative that challenges patriarchal distortions of history while providing insights into ecological renewal and cultural recovery.

Mann and Kailo introduce their work with an evocative declaration: "*This book walks fearlessly into the cave, following the umbilicus connecting the sauna and the moon lodge to the Mother spirituality around Bear in their dance of cyclical rebirth*" (p. 1). The book examines bear myths from Indigenous American, Finno-Ugric, Siberian, and other global Northern traditions, presenting the bear as a symbol of regeneration, the feminine, and



ecological harmony. Through their meticulous analysis, the authors position these narratives as deeply relevant to contemporary environmental and social crises.

Conceptual Framework and Thematic Depth

At the heart of the book is the concept of 'Original Instructions,' which Mann and Kailo define as ancient ecological and social principles transmitted through bear myths. These instructions emphasize harmony with the natural world and communal welfare, values that the authors argue have been overshadowed by patriarchal ideologies. Kailo writes, "*Putting the world back together requires humanity to recover the sacred, its Original Instructions*" (p. 11). This recovery, they suggest, is critical to addressing the modern world's ecological and social imbalances.

Mann and Kailo explore how the bear's cyclical behaviours—hibernation and spring regeneration—mirror human life cycles, making the bear a universal symbol of rebirth and continuity. As Mann notes, "*The woman who becomes Bear by mating with Bear thus becomes the she-bear ancestor of humanity...The bear's den is the female womb, and the Paleolithic bear caves are the prototype of sacred sites*" (p. 3). This connection between the bear's den and the womb is central to the authors' argument that ancient bear myths celebrated the sacredness of the feminine and its role in creation and regeneration.

The book is divided into two parts: the first focuses on bear myths in North America, examining Indigenous traditions and their deep ecological roots, while the second explores Eurasian bear myths and their reinterpretations under patriarchal systems. Through this structure, the authors trace how these stories evolved, highlighting the shift from matristic narratives to male-centered myths during the Bronze Age. Kailo critiques this transformation, stating: "*Clearly, something happened between the Paleolithic and Bronze Age, a cultural switch that moved the long-standing focus from Mother to Father*" (p. 102).

Methodological Strengths and Interdisciplinary Approaches

One of the book's greatest strengths is its interdisciplinary approach. Mann and Kailo draw on archaeology, mythology, feminist theory, and Indigenous studies to reveal patterns across cultures and time periods. Their method involves peeling back layers of patriarchal reinterpretations to uncover the original meanings of these myths. As the authors explain, "*We scour traditions...scraping off the overlay of the later ages, in the foreign and*

damaging interpretations thrust upon them over time” [sic] (p. 12). This meticulous process allows them to reconstruct the ‘original patina’ of bear myths.

The authors’ feminist critique is particularly compelling. They challenge the male-focused interpretations of ancient bear ceremonies, arguing that these narratives have been stripped of their matristic origins. Kailo writes, *“The studies of bear ceremonials focus on male hunting...whereas the mother who gave him birth is left on the back burner, like Virgin Mary, a mere prelude to the important ‘master narrative’”* (p. 76). This reframing restores women’s centrality to these stories, emphasizing their roles as creators, nurturers, and spiritual leaders.

Mann’s analysis of Indigenous American traditions further enriches the book. She explores how women’s agricultural practices aligned with the bear’s behaviour, connecting human and ecological rhythms. For example, *“The bear’s times of year are clearly female associated...their cycle is too clearly associated with human gestation to be missed by anyone paying attention”* (p. 21). This insight underscores the ecological wisdom embedded in these traditions.

Scope for Further Scholarly Exploration

Despite its many strengths, the book leaves some areas for further exploration. While Mann and Kailo effectively critique patriarchal distortions of bear myths, they could expand their discussion of how these narratives have persisted despite cultural erasures. Additionally, while the book’s accessible language is a refreshing departure from academic jargon, the dense interdisciplinary content may still be challenging for general readers. More contextual explanations of key terms, such as ‘Original Instructions,’ would help bridge the gap between specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Another area for improvement is the limited focus on how these ancient principles can be practically applied in contemporary contexts. The authors touch on the relevance of bear myths to modern ecological and feminist movements but could provide more concrete examples of how these traditions might inform present-day practices.

Cultural Relevance and Contemporary Applications

Mann and Kailo’s work is deeply relevant to contemporary issues of ecological sustainability and gender equity. As Kailo observes, *“Traces of the Woman Who Married the Bear are evident in the life-celebrating, socio-cosmic matrix that honors especially the*

icons of regeneration" (p. 120). By reclaiming the spiritual and ecological wisdom of bear myths, the authors offer a framework for reimagining humanity's relationship with nature.

The book's critique of patriarchal narratives also resonates with ongoing feminist discourses. Mann's reflection on Indigenous traditions highlights the importance of restoring women's roles in spiritual and cultural practices: "*In the long-ago, the Woman Who Married the Bear promised life...Bear's story links the patterns of stars in the Breath of Sky to the matching pattern of seasons in the Blood of Earth*" (p. 15). This poetic imagery underscores the universal relevance of these myths as symbols of regeneration and harmony.

Scholarly Impact and Target Readership

The Woman Who Married the Bear is a significant contribution to feminist scholarship, mythology, and ecological studies. Its interdisciplinary approach and feminist critique make it an invaluable resource for scholars of mythology, gender studies, and environmental history. As Kailo writes, "*Bear is neither revisionary nor patriarchal in origin. Instead, Bear is rooted in something that we might call 'our own'*" (p. 149). This assertion encapsulates the book's mission to reclaim the sacredness of the feminine and its relevance to modern challenges.

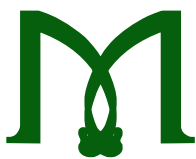
The book is also accessible to non-academic audiences interested in mythology, spirituality, and ecology. Its emphasis on storytelling and the interconnectedness of life offers a powerful reminder of humanity's deep ties to the natural world.

Conclusion

The Woman Who Married the Bear is an extraordinary work that bridges the past and present, offering profound insights into humanity's spiritual and ecological heritage. Mann and Kailo's reclamation of bear mythology is both a scholarly achievement and a call to action, urging readers to recover the wisdom of the Original Instructions. As they poignantly remind us: "*To ignore Mother is to lack respect, something Bear warned against*" (p. 86). This book is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the intersections of mythology, ecology, and gender in a world increasingly disconnected from its roots.

About the reviewer

Carla Ionescu, PhD, is an ancient historian specializing in the study of Artemis and ancient goddess traditions. She is the founder of The Artemis Research Centre, where she leads the Artemis Mapping Project, aiming to digitally map and preserve ancient temples dedicated to Artemis across the Mediterranean, Balkans, and Middle East. Dr. Ionescu also hosts "The Goddess Project" podcast, exploring the mythologies, rituals, and legacies of ancient goddesses.



Recension du livre:

**Heide Göttner-Abendroth,
« Les Sociétés Matriarcales –
Recherches sur les cultures autochtones à travers le monde »
traduit de l'anglais par Camille Chaplain
(Paris: *des femmes* Antoinette Fouque, 2019)**

ADRIANA KORTLANDT

Certains livres ont changé ma vie à jamais. Le livre « Les Sociétés Matriarcales – Recherches sur les cultures autochtones à travers le monde » figure dans cette liste.

Jusqu'à présent les modes de vie matriarcaux ne jouaient pratiquement aucun rôle dans nos livres et nos pensées. Pourtant, imaginer ou souhaiter l'existence des sociétés d'égalité entre les sexes n'est pas une idée naïve ni un rêve détaché de la réalité de maintes sociétés humaines.

Depuis des décennies, l'œuvre de Heide Göttner-Abendroth a influencé la pensée des générations de chercheuses et de chercheurs dans divers domaines universitaires. Elle a aussi inspiré les lectrices et les lecteurs en général, désireux d'élargir leurs horizons et leurs connaissances sur le phénomène humain et sa richesse culturelle. Son ouvrage « Les



Sociétés Matriarcales – Recherches sur les cultures autochtones à travers le monde » est un élément innovateur dans le domaine des recherches matriarcales modernes.

Göttner-Abendroth définit par sa démarche scientifique et méthodologique le concept du matriarcat, jusqu'à présent pratiquement compris comme une inversion, une espèce de miroir comportemental du patriarcat, mais la chercheuse est aux antipodes : grâce à une pensée translucide et aux analyses comparatives de plusieurs cultures vivantes, sa recherche rend accessible la structure des sociétés matriarcales. Son livre nous aide à revisiter l'histoire humaine, à connaître et comprendre les contextes sociaux structurellement différents de ceux qui constituent les 3000-4000 ans de patriarcat dans ses contours les plus « marquants ».

L'introduction présente la philosophie de l'autrice, sa méthodologie, sa démarche systématique pour définir une société matriarcale, son cheminement intellectuel et spirituel, ainsi que la pertinence politique des recherches de cette forme sociale. Le premier chapitre retrace l'histoire critique des points de vue sur le matriarcat : les pionniers, la discussion marxiste, les recherches sur la religion, l'anthropologie, l'ethnologie, les traditions orales, l'archéologie, la préhistoire... En résumé, il s'agit donc des approches qui ont fondé et soutiennent encore diverses formes de domination patriarcales et colonisatrices. Cela nous invite à tourner le kaléidoscope de nos pensées et de nos points de vue, à remettre en question et à transformer les domaines socioculturels de notre savoir.

Les dix-sept autres chapitres sont consacrés aux sociétés matriarcales contemporaines d'Asie orientale, d'Indonésie, de l'océan Pacifique, des Amériques, de l'Inde, et de l'Afrique. L'opinion préconçue selon laquelle il ne s'agirait que de petites communautés isolées est réfuté de manière frappante. Malgré toutes les différences entre les régions du monde et grâce à d'innombrables réflexions, à des sources d'information et à des fragments de textes, l'autrice nous dévoile les grands points communs entre ces sociétés toujours vivantes et actives.

Afin de décrire les structures et les lignes directrices qui fonctionnent à tous les niveaux des sociétés matriarcales, l'autrice a utilisé l'analyse critique et les études interculturelles sur la base d'une recherche interculturelle au cas par cas. Donc à partir d'une image plus complète de ces sociétés elle a développé la définition utilisée dans ses recherches, et c'est ce dont elle souhaite nous parler dans ce livre. Selon ses recherches le matriarcat est défini comme une société horizontale non hiérarchique de parenté matrilineaire, égalitaire et pacifique.

Pour proposer cette définition structurelle, elle se réfère aux quatre niveaux différents de chaque société :

1. Le niveau économique (économie équilibrée et de partage) ;
2. Le niveau sociale (sociétés horizontales et non hiérarchisées de parenté matrilineaire) ;
3. Le niveau politique (société égalitaires fondées sur le consensus) ;
4. Le niveau spirituel et culturel (la divinité est immanente, car le monde entier est considéré comme divin et féminin).

Il est utile de souligner que dans les matriarcats, l'égalité ne signifie pas un simple nivellement des différences. Les différences naturelles entre les sexes et les générations sont respectées et honorées, mais elles ne conduisent pas à des hiérarchies, comme c'est souvent le cas pour le patriarcat.

Cet univers richissime m'a invité à revoir la « construction » de mon identité, à la fois privée et collective, et à réaliser que les possibilités de développement humain et son appartenance à la nature ne se limitent pas à ce que l'on m'a enseigné jusqu'à présent.

L'œuvre entière de Göttner-Abendroth suscite de nombreuses controverses. Cela stimule de nouvelles discussions et recherches. Au milieu des débats, un grand mérite de l'autrice est de montrer que d'autres réalités étaient et sont possibles, que les êtres humains ont (peut-être) vécu de façon très différentes de ce que l'on croit communément – et continuent à le faire, même dans la quasi-invisibilité de nos regards.

Oui, dans le monde entier il existe encore des sociétés égalitaires dans lesquelles les mères réglementent l'économie, la résolution des conflits au sein de la communauté et du clan, et la vie sociale. Ceci étant basé sur la parité des relations entre les sexes.

Que se passerait-il au niveau de nos pensées, de notre vision du féminin et du masculin, de nos relations d'interdépendance avec les mondes qui nous côtoient, si l'on se laissait inspirer par ces sociétés ? Comment cela nourrirait-il la sève de nos vies ?

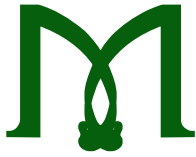
Les Sociétés Matriarcales – Recherches sur les cultures autochtones à travers le monde, de Heide Göttner-Abendroth : un livre, une chercheuse et une recherche incontournables.

À propos de l'auteur

Heide Göttner-Abendroth, née en Allemagne en 1941, est docteure en philosophie des sciences et a enseigné la philosophie pendant dix ans à l'université de Munich (1973-

1983). Elle consacre sa vie et ses recherches aux sociétés et cultures matriarcales dont elle est devenue l'une des grandes spécialistes mondiales, ouvrant la voie à toute une génération de jeunes anthropologues. En 1986, elle a fondé en Allemagne l'Académie internationale HAGIA pour les recherches matriarcales modernes, dont elle assure depuis la direction et qui est à l'initiative de nombreux congrès internationaux sur le sujet. Elle a été sélectionnée en 2005 par le programme international « 1000 Femmes de paix à travers le monde » comme candidate pour le prix Nobel de la Paix.

À propos du critique



Review:

**Laura S. Grillo,
*An Intimate Rebuke:
Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa*
(Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)**

UMASOM BLESSING AMOS

In her book *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa*, Laura Grillo intensively analyzes West African women's demonstration of spiritual and moral power using their genitals: Female Genital Power (FGP). She argues that although these women may not hold political power, their genital power influences the affairs of their societies. Grillo aims to trace the history of FGP in West Africa and to reveal the genealogy of matrifocality and its importance in the formation of West African societies. Grillo argues that the erosion of women's rights by colonialism has jeopardized the moral foundation of West African communal life. She illuminates the power that women hold by using their genitals to assert their desires, which is a spectacular phenomenon.

For example, the *Egbiki*, found particularly in Cote d'Ivoire, is conducted by elderly women before the *Dipri* festival to purify the village and ward off evil. The women circle the village



naked; they slap their genitals and bare breasts and, with pestles, pound the ground. This ritual curses and wards off evil, allowing for a successful *Dipri* festival the next day. Women's bodies are considered sacred, so no one else is allowed to look upon their nakedness during this display of FGP. It is believed that anyone who lays eyes on their nudity will be cursed.

Grillo emphasizes that not all women participate in these ritual of FGP; post-menopausal women feature in them, as the emphasis is not on women's capacity to reproduce. Women in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial West Africa have employed FGP to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with policies and, also, to act as spiritual weapons. Grillo argues against the ideas of Cheikh Anta Diop and Ifi Amadiume, who wrote that the origin of West African society rests on matriarchy. Grillo, however, asserts that matriarchy did not mark the civilization of West African societies but rather it was a matrifocal morality, where the female elders are held in high esteem and are bearers of ultimate moral authority. The FGP rituals are remnants of that esteem and authority.

The book is divided into three parts, focusing on the themes of Homeliness, Worldliness and Timeliness. Part One has three chapters; here, FGP practices are assessed in the context of local spiritual practices where these acts are seen as the highest authority in the society. Here, also, is a refutation of the belief that women have always been victims of male dominance, as Grillo shows they have, rather, been a moral force. Against the idea that women cannot stand nor speak for themselves, Grillo's book demonstrates the power women show when asserting their desires and demonstrating their discomfort on any subject matter. Part Two argues that matrifocal morality was the basis of alliances among ethnic groups in West Africa. This part also points out post-menopausal women's role in standing against post-colonial violence. They stand as a moral authority which has the capacity both to authorize rulership and to chastise the abuse of power by political leaders. For example, women employed FGP against the Ivorian government during the civil war, which led to death for many of them. This mortal danger, however, did not hinder them from mobilizing again to protest against the government. Part Three emphasizes that women's use of FGP is a timely intervention as an emergency measure. During the Ivorian civil war, sexual violence was identified as an arena for conflict between the factions, and Ivorian women, both young and old, suffered horrifically. These widespread rapes also violated the source of women's spiritual authority and the base of their power. Afterwards, elderly women mobilized and advocated for the indemnification of female victims, which was almost being neglected.

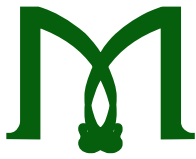
Grillo succeeds in contributing immensely to Women's Studies by introducing a new perspective on the influence of matrifocal morality, based on her rich ethnographic collection from the oral tradition. She lived in Cote d'Ivoire for three years in order to

gather and have firsthand information about the topic, which is supplemented with a vast literature of published books and articles, newspaper publications, online publications, and unpublished materials.

This book is well suited for students and academics looking to learn about Female Genital Power. Including 'West Africa' in the title is a stretch, though, as her focus is mainly on Cote d'Ivoire, even though she references some other parts of West Africa, like Nigeria, in her book. Despite this, it is a good addition to gender studies scholarship. I found this book particularly interesting because it was easy to read and her personal experiences made it the more relatable. It should inspire other scholars to research on FGP in other parts of Africa.

About the reviewer

Umasom Blessing Amos holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies and Diplomacy and Master of Arts degree in History from University of Benin, Benin City. Her research interests are in women, gender studies, and ethnic studies in the Niger Delta region and other aspects of Nigerian history.



Obituary:

Cheryl Anne Gaver

LISA CRANDALL AND DONNA MCILVEEN

Reverend Doctor Cheryl Anne Gaver, MDiv and PhD, passed away in Brockville, Ontario, on 21 April 2022, age 68 years, after a lengthy and courageous battle with cancer. She was born in Montreal, Quebec, to Kenneth and Esther (Lasure) Gaver, of Montreal and Oakville, Ontario, respectively. Cheryl was predeceased by her parents and her brother Kenneth Jr. (Jenny) of Georgia. She is survived by her sister, Margaret Wilson (Charles) of Maryland, nieces and nephews John Gaver, Annie Gaver, Jennifer Wilson-White (Shawn) and Charles Wilson (May). She is interred in the family plot in Mutual, Ohio, USA.

In her younger years Cheryl travelled extensively across the United States and Canada with her parents. She credited those experiences as her introduction to multiculturalism. She developed a keen interest in exploring how people from different cultures communicate and negotiate shared spaces, and how religions change as they spread across cultures. Cheryl earned her Bachelor of Arts in French Language and Literature from Vassar College, New York, in 1975. In 1979, she enrolled at Knox College, Toronto, where she earned her Master of Divinity; she was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacraments in 1982 at St. Paul's Church, Bramalea, Ontario. She served a two-year appointment at Norwich and Bookton, both in Ontario.



In the early part of her career, Cheryl demonstrated her care and compassion for others by working as an aid and companion to seniors in her community of Burlington, Ontario. She then moved on to the business world and honed her organizing and administrative talents working for Atomic Energy of Canada, where she was specifically involved with their Y2K Scientific Analysis Computer Program Group.

A life-long learner, Cheryl returned to school regularly over the years and earned a certificate in Office & Information Systems; a certificate in Computer Foundations; a post-graduate diploma in Jewish-Christian Relations; an Master of Arts in Religion/Religious studies; and a doctorate in Religious Studies (Anthropology). Her doctoral thesis title is *Solitudes in Shared Spaces: Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian Anglicans in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories in the Post-Residential School Era*.

In addition to her studies, Cheryl maintained her ties with the academic community by participating in research projects and through teaching a variety of courses at several universities and colleges, including University of Ottawa, Wilfred Laurier, and Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advance Learning.

Cheryl returned to the ministry in 2003 as the Part-time Youth Ministry Coordinator at St. Cuthbert's Anglican Church in Oakville. In 2015, she moved to Prescott, Ontario, and in 2016 she was appointed Presbytery Ministry Animator (half-time) for the Presbyteries of Ottawa and Seaway-Glengarry. In 2019, she began serving as minister (half-time) for the three-point pastoral charge of Finch, Avonmore, and Gravel Hill. During the COVID years she used Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom to stay in touch with her parishioners.

Cheryl had a strong and passionate commitment to healing and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and throughout her life, she worked with Canadian Indigenous communities. She shared her vast knowledge and understanding with the Presbytery of Seaway-Glengarry through educational sessions. In 2019, Cheryl participated in the Presbyterian Church in Canada's Healing and Reconciliation Tour, which included visits to several Indigenous ministries in Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

Cheryl kept up her academic contacts through her participation in the Interculture Research Centre at the University of Ottawa. This group has evolved into the extra-institutional charity known as the International Network for Training, Education and Research on Culture (Network on Culture).

In addition to her many accomplishments, Cheryl was a pet lover and over the years adopted many dogs, often rescued and in need of a loving and safe home. Her beloved companion Peanut (her last rescue dog) passed on not long after Cheryl.

In her spare time, she gave piano lessons in her home, as well as classes on music theory and music appreciation. Another serious interest for Cheryl was genealogy: she explored her family roots in great detail, which led to the creation of *The Gaver Families: A Jigsaw Puzzle History*.

Over the years Cheryl's published works were as eclectic as her interests:

- *The Gaver families: A Jigsaw Puzzle History*, 2 vols. (Self-published, 1992)
- *Joining the Church: Christian Basics and Who Are We? Joining the Church: Christian Basics and Who Are We?* 2 vols. (Self-published, 2003)
- *Love's Adventure: God's Journal of Creation Love's Adventure: God's Journal of Creation* (Walkabout Press, 2010)
- *Solitudes in Shared Spaces: Aboriginal and EuroCanadian Anglicans in the Yukon and Northwest Territories in the Post-Residential School Era*, diss. University of Ottawa, Department of Classics and Religious Studies; accessed 10 March 2025 and available at URL <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/15d78205-9f91-4d2f-ae22-a480a17f2740/content>
- "Residential Schools in Canada: Why The Message Is Not Getting Across," in *Power through Testimony: Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation*, eds. Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017), 198-219.

We miss you, Cheryl!

About the authors

Lisa Crandall (MA SRS) is an academic on hiatus working as a writer, editor, and researcher.

Donna McIlveen is a Diaconal Minister within The Presbyterian Church in Canada and is the clerk of the Presbytery of Seaway-Glengarry. She lives near Johnstown, Ontario.