



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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Nigeria: The name of the river goddess of the village Enugu-Ngwo; whether she chooses a woman to become her priestess; the manner in which she chooses her priestess; the priestess's duties, including ceremonies related to infertility, widows and the circumcision of married women; the consequences of refusing to accept the position of priestess once chosen

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

According to a professor of anthropology at Southern Illinois University (SIU), Carbondale who specializes in Nigeria, it is very difficult to determine which river or water goddess is associated with the village Enugu-Ngwo [located in the town of Enugu (WWC Professor 7 May 2008)] without going to Nigeria and determining the precise river or stream in question (SIU Professor 30 Apr. 2008). The reason is that goddesses in Nigeria are both "widespread" and "local" (ibid.). For example, there are certain water goddesses that are associated with many bodies of water all over Africa - like "Mammy Water" (SIU Professor 30 Apr. 2008), also spelled Mami Wata (WWC Professor 6 May 2008). The SIU Professor also stated, however, that every village has a particular stream or spring which is associated with a particular goddess with its own unique name (30 Apr. 2008). The SIU Professor emphasized that the Igbo, the people indigenous to Enugu, are "particularistic" with their gods and goddesses (30 Apr. 2008).

A professor of anthropology at Warren Wilson College (WWC), Asheville, North Carolina who has conducted extensive field research on water spirits in southeastern Nigeria provided the following information:

[W]ater spirits ... play an important role in the indigenous belief system of the various local ethnic groups in the region - including the Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, and Itsekiri. ... Many of the local villages in these areas have a particular female deity - usually of a local stream or river - who resides over a pantheon of water spirits. In Enugu she has several names, including Nne Mmiri, Osimmiri/Osimmili, and sometimes she may be referred to with the larger more generic name in pidgin English, Mami Wata (or mother water). Water spirits are served and honored by priests and priestesses who dedicate their lives to her. (6 May 2008)

With respect to the selection of priestesses, the SIU Professor stated that the river goddess chooses a woman to be her priestess and that the manner of selection varies (30 Apr. 2008). An eldest daughter with the appropriate family lineage, or a woman whose grandmother or mother was a priestess may be chosen to become a priestess (SIU Professor 30 Apr. 2008). According to the SIU Professor, a dream might be involved in the selection process (ibid.). The SIU Professor also stated that there is the notion that "Spirit" chooses the woman to be a priestess (ibid.).

The WWC Professor provided the following information on the selection of priestesses:

In order to become a priestess one is "chosen" by the water spirits. This usually manifests itself in many ways. For some, they may experience severe illness, infertility, or temporary emotional instability. Others may experience marital difficulties, financial problems or overall "bad luck". These persons are taken to a local healer/diviner or priest/priestess in order to determine the cause. It is at this time that an individual may be diagnosed as being afflicted by a water spirit. If diagnosed as such, the individual is required to set up a shrine to the spirit and enter into a spiritual commitment with the spirit, obeying certain taboos, and abiding certain rules. In some cases the individual may choose, or on some occasions is required, to become initiated into a religious group dedicated to worshipping the water spirits through song and dance and animal and food sacrifice. Initiates learn from other priests and priestesses and carry out an apprenticeship, learning how to use herbs and medicines for healing future patients and learning how to communicate with the spirits through dreams, possession and trance. (6 May 2008)

With respect to ceremonies, the SIU Professor stated that "[s]ome priestesses preside over ceremonies held every other year for the young women in a community who are coming of age. These ceremonies are believed to be essential to assure marriage and pregnancy" (30 Apr. 2008). Other ceremonies are performed to help women who are unable to have children (SIU Professor 30 Apr. 2008). The WWC Professor provided the following information regarding the duties and ceremonies of priestesses:

A priestess often uses her new vocation as a source of income and she will eventually train some of her own patients as priestesses as well. She uses methods of divination to discover what is ailing an individual, [and] she uses her local knowledge of herbs to help cure certain illnesses. On some occasions, she may conduct an initiation ceremony for a patient, requiring them to visit the local stream and offer sacrifice. Priestesses tend to specialize in curing barrenness, epilepsy and depression. (6 May 2008)

The WWC Professor was not aware of a case of a water priestess conducting circumcisions and stated that

this is usually carried out by other senior women of the villages. But because water spirits focus on fertility, and many ethnic groups in the region associate female circumcision with increased fertility, it is certainly possible. However, if circumcision occurs, it is almost always carried out before marriage - for the Igbo - usually on infants. Circumcisions are designed to increase a woman's fertility and prepare her for marriage - so they are conducted primarily before marriage if conducted at all. (6 May 2008)

Information on ceremonies pertaining to widows could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the WWC Professor, the consequences of refusing to be a water priestess once chosen "are spiritual, not social" (6 May 2008).

If one denies their calling, it is believed that the water spirits will be unhappy and will continue to harass the individual which will manifest through sickness and the other symptoms mentioned previously. (WWC Professor 6 May 2008)

Similarly, the SIU Professor stated that a woman may become afflicted with a condition that may be construed as a sign that she has ignored her commitment to become a priestess (30 Apr. 2008). The SIU Professor recounted the story of a Nigerian woman who imparted the following story:

The woman had converted to Christianity and moved to a village away from her family (SIU Professor 30 Apr. 2008). At a certain point, she became paralyzed (ibid.). After seeking extensive medical help without success, medical professionals advised her to see a traditional native doctor (ibid.). The native doctor told her that the reason she had become paralyzed was that she had not fulfilled her calling as a priestess of a water goddess (ibid.). In order to be cured, the woman was told she should undergo the initiation rites of a priestess and fulfill the obligations required of her (ibid.). The woman stated that she fulfilled these obligations and was subsequently cured of her paralysis (ibid.). A 30 July 2007 article in the *Daily Sun* documents a similar story of an Enugu woman who had health problems and other difficulties until she underwent initiation rites into the "White Star Mermaid" cult (also *Owu Mmiri*), a group that worships a water spirit that "appears in the form of a white mermaid out of the water."

Similarly, the SIU Professor stated that there can be supernatural consequences for refusing to become a priestess, such as death, and explained that community members might say that if a woman was struck dead by lightning, it was because she refused her role as a priestess (30 Apr. 2008). The SIU Professor added, however, that it would not be implausible that if a woman refused the position of priestess, she could be poisoned by a native doctor (30 Apr. 2008). The SIU Professor noted that native doctors possess a high degree of sophistication with respect to poisoning methods (30 Apr. 2008). The SIU Professor stated that he was not aware of a specific case of a woman being poisoned for refusing to become a priestess (30 Apr. 2008).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Daily Sun [Lagos]. 30 July 2007. "Serving Two Masters: The Case of the Self-Confessed Christian and Priestess of the Water Goddess." (IMDiversity.com) <http://www.imdiversity.com/Villages/Global/Global_News_Headlines/ServingTwoMasters.asp> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2008]

Professor, Southern Illinois University (SIU), Carbondale. 30 April 2008. Telephone interview with the Research Directorate.

Professor, Warren-Wilson College (WWC), Asheville. 7 May 2008. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

_____. 6 May 2008. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact a professor of anthropology at Franklin and Marshall College (F&M) and an author of a book on Igbo cosmology were unsuccessful. An author of a book on Enugu customs was unable to provide information. A professor of history at Michigan State University (MSU) was unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet sites, including: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

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