

do such bodies determine who is a legitimate or illegitimate healer, or (in Mozambique) set a schedule of fees for cures so radically individualized? How does the Zimbabwe association determine if herbal remedies are efficacious and thus eligible for processing and selling by the association? Such inquiries would get to the very heart of authority and power—of where borders are drawn and who has the power to establish them. On this note, Simmons seems to draw his own boundaries by using the term “Shona Medicines.” Given that Zimbabwe is a multiethnic state, one is left wondering if and why “Ndebele medicines” are ignored or deemed ineffective, and why Ndebele healers may be excluded from the bounds of professionalism.

Finally, I found it troublesome that a book focused on contemporary healing practices in southeastern Africa—a region wracked by HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria—offers so little practical application. According to many of their academic Web sites, these authors seem very engaged in activist projects; given that, I wondered why they failed to explain the implications of their work. West’s essay also indicates a problematic degree of anthropological distance: since West tells the reader he was trained as an emergency medical technician, one wonders why he did not vocally intervene when he learns his interviewees were engaging in unsafe practices—improper condom use and reusing unsterilized razor blades—and potentially spreading HIV/AIDS.

However, despite these concerns, Luedke and West’s book does indeed raise important issues; that in itself is what animates these concerns, and makes the book very interesting reading.

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Sabine Jell-Bahlsen. *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2008. xiv + 433 pp. Photographs. Illustrations. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper.

While the title might suggest a specific focus on a rather esoteric topic, Jell-Bahlsen’s book is, like the Igbo water deity it describes throughout its pages, much more complex than it may initially seem. Based on the author’s twenty-five years of research in southeastern Nigeria, this work is actually an ethnographic study of indigenous Igbo religion, epistemology, and social practice. It is by far the most comprehensive and carefully researched work to date on the female water deity known as Ogbuide in the town of Oguta, Nigeria—more popularly known throughout sub-Saharan Africa as Mami Wata. Jell-Bahlsen’s work is also a major contribution to religious studies, to African studies, and especially to Igbo studies.

As an Igboist and a researcher of Mami Wata, I found one of the book’s greatest strengths to be its descriptions of indigenous religion as a historical,

political, economic, and social process. This is most evident in the introduction, where the author argues that because the worship of the mother water deity is so intricately intertwined with local life and the environment, Igbo (and other indigenous religions) should be viewed as “alternative strategies for social and economic development” (7–8). The author is direct and clear about her advocacy of indigenous religion. She continually criticizes what she calls “religious colonialism”—the Christian bias against and castigation of indigenous religion and customary practices. While the author does acknowledge some productive and positive consequences of missionary work in Igboland, she also makes it quite clear how these processes are slowly eroding indigenous belief systems. I agree with her premise that the industrialized world has much to learn from the “university of the village” and that we can use these lessons to evaluate and question the values of industrial capitalism, especially in terms of respecting and preserving our environment.

The work as a whole is ethnographic in the sense that it is loaded with details on Igbo history, myth, cosmology, ritual practice, and a variety of social customs— all based on extensive fieldwork. I was a bit disappointed, however, that the author did not include more of her personal encounters and experiences. It is only in an endnote in the first chapter that we learn how much faith and trust the author places in the prayers of Oguta’s resident Obi, or sacred king, when her daughter has a minor accident back home in Germany. Later, in chapter 14, the author describes an “unexplained force” that prevented her husband from taking a photograph of a sacred grove associated with a water deity (213); this again is found in an endnote. It is obvious from the amount of work and effort that was put into the creation of this book that the author is deeply invested in this topic. While the reader certainly gets a sense of the author’s own convictions, I found myself longing for more of these personal stories.

Because this book is the author’s attempt to compile a wide variety of previous writings, publications, and conference papers on this topic into one volume, it does not always make for smooth reading. This is particularly the case with the organization and flow of chapters. Some seem out of place; others seem too brief; still others seem repetitive. Readers may become frustrated with having to turn frequently to later chapters for definitions and explanations.

Despite these minor shortcomings, this work is invaluable for its commitment to describing both the ideological and practical dimensions of Mami Wata worship, and for demonstrating the importance of this worship for women’s empowerment and the sustainability of the local community and environment as a whole. Most of all, the author has certainly done her part in honoring the mother of waters.

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