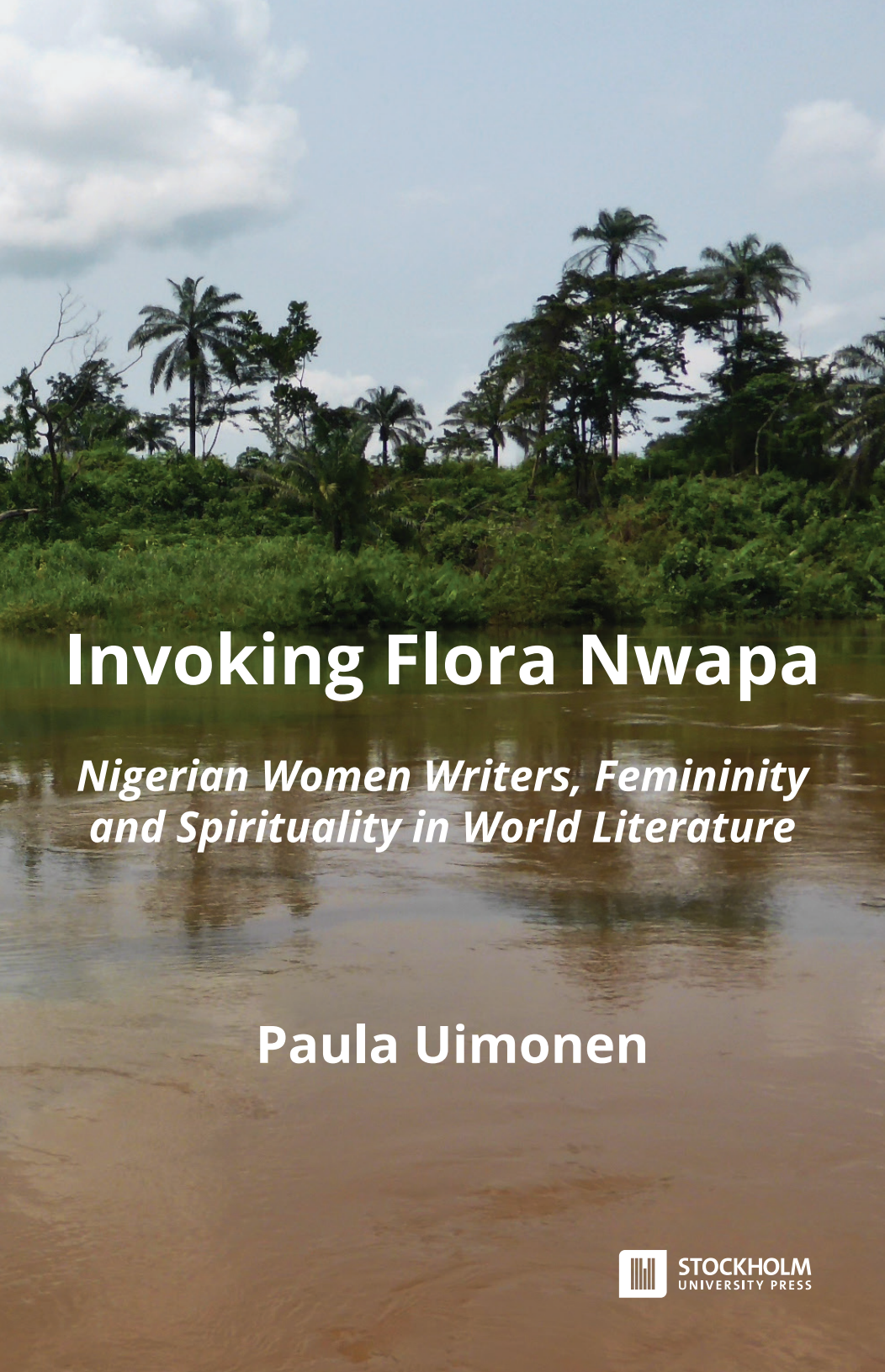

Invoking Flora Nwapa

Nigerian Women Writers, Femininity and Spirituality in World Literature

Paula Uimonen

STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Thomas Fillitz, Professor, Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Vienna, Austria

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The book proposal was reviewed by one additional reviewer who wishes to remain anonymous.

In loving memory of

Terho Uimonen (1960–2015)

Dr Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro (1926–2018)

Saumu Omari Kirama (1945–2019)

Heidi Moksnes (1962–2020)

I dedicate this book to my mother
Aili Uimonen (1930–2017)

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While writing this book I have lost several mothers, starting with my biological mother Aili Uimonen. Shortly before she passed on in April 2017, I reflected that the closest I have come to motherhood is by being a daughter. After my mother's passing, I came to cherish her life-giving and nurturing powers with greater clarity, because had she not given me life, I would not be alive. For some time, the pain of loss blocked my ability to fully appreciate motherhood in the works of Flora Nwapa and other Nigerian female writers. But I hope that I have managed to do these literary mothers justice. I also cherish the nurturing love of my Ugandan mother Dr. Sarah Ntiro (Akiiki), and my Tanzanian mother Sauma (Mama Kaduma), who have now joined their ancestors. Thankfully, I am not left motherless, as other mothers come into my life, just like children come into my life, through other mothers. I feel loved and protected by my Nigerian mother in Oguta, N'Dr Stella Akuzor Anozia, Ezeugegbe One. I recognise how insightfully my little sister Idenu Anozia shares the love of Ogbuide on Facebook, coaching new generations. And I appreciate how our sister Joy refuted my notion of not being a mother, after all her own daughter Chidimma calls me mother. By then, I had already been made a mother by Nyamizi in Tanzania, who explained to me that I was not childless, since she was my child. With such loving mothers and daughters, I am truly blessed.

Last but not least, thank you to all readers of this book. By invoking Flora Nwapa, I wish to bring attention to a remarkable woman, whose literary worlds can inspire us to explore the making of other possible worlds. Writing these words in the year of the Covid-19 pandemic, I hope that this book can somehow channel the healing powers of the lake goddess Ogbuide and other water deities, as we try to rebuild our world into a better place for all beings.

Prologue: Ethnography of Flora Nwapa and Nigerian Women Writers

Conceptual groundings in anthropology of world literature

> So I went on and on and on and wrote *Efuru*. I got it typed and thought it wasn't a bad story, but I didn't have the courage to give it to anybody, to read. Then I gave it to Chinua Achebe in Lagos, who read it and said that it was a good story and that he was sending it to his publishers, Heinemann of London. He did. And within four, five months it was accepted for publication. That was how it happened. [How did you feel then?] I felt on top of the world, I felt great, I never knew. And once your book is accepted for publication, you become a writer! […] The first African woman to have a novel published by Heinemann of London […] I made history! [smiles and laughs] (Flora Nwapa in documentary film by NRK TV 1987, 02:17–03:28)

> Today we celebrate not only Flora Nwapa the author and *Efuru* the book, but we celebrate an occasion larger than the two. *Efuru* is not just a novel, and a character in a novel, *Efuru* stands for the values of African womanhood […] The creation of the woman Efuru is immortal, and the message for women defies time.
>
> (Zaynab Alkali, keynote at Efuru@50 in Maiduguri, 1 December 2016)

By invoking Flora Nwapa, this monograph draws attention to Nigerian women writers in world literature, with an emphasis on femininity and spirituality. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* was the first internationally published novel in English by a female African writer (Nwapa 1966). With the establishment of Tana Press

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in 1977, Flora Nwapa also became the first female publisher in Africa. Although Flora Nwapa has been recognized as the Mother of modern African literature, she is not sufficiently acknowledged in world literary canons or world literature studies, which is something this monograph aspires to redress, with the help of earlier studies, especially Nigerian scholarship. Structured around the Efuru@50 celebration in Nigeria in 2016, this book explores the revival of Flora Nwapa's fame as the pioneer of African women's literature. Using an ethnographic rather than biographical approach, it captures Flora Nwapa's literary practice in the context of the Nigerian literary scene and its interlinkages with world literature. The ethnographic portrayal of Flora Nwapa is complemented with an exposé of a select number of contemporary Nigerian women writers, based on interviews carried out during fieldwork in Nigeria. Using a combination of anthropological, literary and African womanist theory, this book uses concepts like creolized aesthetics and womanist worldmaking to advance scholarly understandings of world literature, which is conceived here as a pluriverse of aesthetic worlds.

This monograph aims to contribute to world literature studies with an anthropological perspective that addresses some of the epistemological challenges of literary scholarship. Linked to growing scholarly interest in globalization, world literature studies tend to lean towards a sociological approach. Whether focusing on the global circulation of literature and translation (Damrosch), a literature-world of cultural capital and distinctions (Casanova) or world literature as analogous to the capitalist world system (Moretti), the emphasis has been on the production and circulation of literary objects in the context of global capitalism. More recently, world literature has even been conceptualized as a world-literature system, defined as the literature of the modern capitalist world system, with an emphasis on uneven and unequal development (WReC 2015). This materialist orientation has been challenged for its negligence of normative content and for conflating the world with the globe, thus obscuring imaginary aspects of literature, especially literary worlding (Cheah 2008, 2014) and aesthetic worldmaking (Hayot 2011, 2012). Lately, world literature scholars have suggested that the 'recent turn towards the worlding capacities of literary texts' brings forth the existential

value of literature, especially in this age of crisis, when 'we need to engage to our fullest capacity the imaginative resources of human culture' (Helgesson and Rosendahl Thomsen 2020, 165–6).

Conversely, this monograph contributes to the anthropology of world literature, which is an emerging field of study. In a recent discussion on literary anthropology, Wiles (2018) outlines three main branches: the use of literature as ethnography, the use of literary modes in writing ethnography, and anthropological studies of literary practice. While the first two branches have been explored and debated within the discipline, the anthropology of literary practice has been quite limited, mostly focusing on traditional or oral literary cultures and much less on contemporary literary practices (Wiles 2018, 11). Although problems of representation have not always been considered when using literature as ethnography, literary modes of writing have been discussed in several anthologies (e.g. McGranahan 2020; Wulff 2016). Meanwhile, research gaps in the anthropology of literary practice are slowly being addressed, including world literature. For instance, building on ethnographic fieldwork in Nigeria, Barber has explored the hidden histories of African literary culture, from small-scale print to handwritten diaries (Barber 2006), and, in an effort to rethink literature, she has conceptualized text as weaving with words (Barber 2016). In the first anthropological study of writers, Wulff explores the social worlds of contemporary Irish authors, from creative talent and writing practices to marketing and professional career paths, along with Irish literature in a world context (Wulff 2017). In the multidisciplinary world literature research programme that this study forms part of, anthropologists are exploring a variety of topics: Swedish literature on transnational migration (Wulff 2018), narratives of Siberian exile (Viktorin 2018), the worldmaking capacity of travel writing (Nyqvist 2018), and literary fields and festivals in India (Ståhlberg 2018, 2019). By focusing on Nigerian women writers, this monograph aims to make a contribution to the nascent field of anthropology of world literature.[1]

[1] This study builds on the African Women Writers project, based on fieldwork in Nigeria and Tanzania. The project is part of the research

I approach literature in terms of *storytelling*, thus paying attention to how Nigerian writers themselves view their creative work as well as scholarly appraisals of their literary practice. 'Life in Nigeria is a story,' Eugenia Abu responded when I interviewed her in Abuja: 'the storytelling is everywhere.' Her words echoed those of Flora Nwapa when asked about the purpose of her writing: 'I write because I have a story to tell' (Flora Nwapa, cited in Umeh 1995, 26). Similarly, in her sociology of the Nigerian novel, Griswold underlines that 'Nigerian novelists see themselves as storytellers' (Griswold 2000, 3). With their country's rich history of orature, especially folktales, it is not surprising that Nigerian writers see themselves as storytellers. But there is something to be said for the linkages between storytelling and literature more generally. Comparatively, Irish creative writers also view themselves as storytellers and Irish culture has a long tradition of storytelling, in different genres (Wulff 2017). Storytelling thus offers a productive entry into world literature.

Through storytelling I will probe literature as a form of *worldmaking*. As an aesthetic form, literature conveys imaginary, affective, sensory and relational modes of being in the world, addressing the materiality, sociality, spirituality, morality and politics of human existence. In terms of worldmaking, it reflects the ontogenesis of the world, a literary expression of the anthropological postulation that 'the world is a conversation; it is not the object of our conversation. In this conversation lies *ontogénèse*, the becoming of being' (Ingold 2018, 169, emphasis in original). This is comparable to world literature theory, which has suggested that the world has 'a narrative structure'; it is 'formed by the telling of stories' (Cheah 2014, 325). Through literary storytelling, the world is thus not only imagined but also narrated into existence, which makes aesthetic worldmaking an interesting entry point into how we perceive and relate to the world and how we recreate it.

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programme *Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics in World Literatures* (2016–21). The programme brings together 26 scholars from different disciplines to probe the exchanges, interactions and interlinkages between the cosmopolitan/global and the vernacular/local (Helgesson 2018). See http://worldlit.se and http://www.womenwriters.one.

Exploring Nigerian literature from within, this monograph addresses world literature from a dewesternized perspective. It has been suggested that '"world literature" is what happens to comparative literature when – having, however belatedly, engaged the task of "unthinking" Eurocentrism – it goes global' (WReC 2015, 5). While the task of unthinking eurocentrism is long overdue, it has yet to make sufficient inroads into world literature studies. There is still a tendency to appraise non-Western literature from the perspective of Western centres. In the case of African literature, it has often been assumed that African writers primarily address international audiences, as discussed in the extroversion of the African novel (Julien 2006, 2018), while the scholarly gaze tends to focus on African novels that circulate in the global market (e.g. Huggan 2001; Krishnan 2014), often highlighting global inequality in print culture (e.g. Helgesson 2009), thus emphasizing the uneven development of the world-literature system (WReC 2015). While world system theory is good to think with, not least to highlight structural inequalities veiled by the ideologies of universalism and racism–sexism (Wallerstein 1990), such capitalism-centred theoretical models have certain shortcomings. In addition to being too materialistic, to the point of reducing culture to ideology, they tend to reify global asymmetries (Ortner 1984, 143). A more radical departure is offered by what anthropologists have called theory from the South, capturing world-historical processes from the postcolonial margins (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). In world literature studies, this would mean paying more attention to postcolonial studies, which have challenged the field's Western-centrism, but their 'irreconcilable disagreements' are not easily overcome, politically or aesthetically (Helgesson and Rosendahl Thomsen 2020, 34). Yet, since both fields value diversity in world literature, there is some common ground to build upon.

Recent debates in the anthropology of world art offer interesting points of comparison for a more pluralistic approach to world literature. Scholars have argued for a reconceptualization of world art in terms of global art, insisting on equality and diversity, thus advancing efforts to 'reject the universalizing canon of the European/North American art world', while striving to surpass the 'repeated documentations of inequalities, stratifications, and

exclusions' in world art studies (Fillitz and van der Grijp 2018, 11). While recognizing the global dimensions of local art worlds in global art, Fillitz has emphasized the need to think along the lines of a 'global art worlds network', thus emphasizing 'a plurality of interconnected art worlds' (Fillitz 2018, 101). These efforts to think beyond Eurocentric hierarchical ordering and global markets offer valuable pointers towards a more inclusive appraisal of literature as well.

Returning to world literature, a productive reorientation can be initiated by adapting a *globalectic* vision, thus embracing 'wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tension, and motion' (Thiong'o 2014, 8). In the quest for a 'cosmopolitan construction of world literature as a shared planetary domain' (Helgesson and Thomsen 2020, 4), it is perhaps worth looking at the globe from afar: 'On its surface, there is no one center; any point is equally a center' (Thiong'o 2014, 8). Thinking of globality through postcoloniality, Thiong'o argues that conceptions of world literature 'must bring the postcolonial to the center', insisting that the 'postcolonial is at the heart of the constitution of Goethe's world literature, and even in theory, it indeed constitutes the nonimperial heart of the modern and postmodern' (Thiong'o 2014, 55). While I find globalectics good to think with, I also strive to move beyond postcoloniality, to avoid the risk of reifying the power structures of coloniality. In so doing, I pay attention to the epistemic disobedience needed for decolonial delinking (Mignolo 2011). Again, I appreciate the emphasis on diversity and interconnectedness, in this case 'viewing the world as an interconnected diversity', while recognizing that it is a 'world entangled through and by the colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo 2018a, x–xi). But perhaps the heart of world literature is to be found outside (post)modernity and (post/neo)coloniality altogether, in other possible worlds.

This monograph explores literary interconnectedness from the *crossroads* of Nigerian women writers (Nnaemeka 1995). It has been ascertained that 'African women writers are writing from the crossroads and, at the same time, writing the crossroads', and that '[t]o write the crossroads is not to see, speak, and write this *or* that; it is to see, speak, and write this *and* that' (Nnaemeka

1995, 109, emphasis in original). Focusing on Flora Nwapa's work, Nnaemeka convincingly argues that 'Crossroads, common ground and nodal point, is a location that allows the coexistence of and interaction between ambiguities and paradoxes and sustains the proliferation of meanings' (Nnaemeka 1997, 108). The crossroads captures the complexities and intricacies of African literature, or what I have elsewhere referred to as a transnational tangle of multilayered location and multidirectional orientation (Uimonen 2018). It pinpoints 'the interstices between multiple poles of belonging' that makes a novel such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe [1958] 1962) 'an instance of world literature', especially the ways in which it 'spectacularly resists identification with any *single* unit such as a nation, language, genre or tradition' (Helgesson and Rosendahl Thomsen 2020, 3, emphasis in original). Indeed, the coexistence of this and that resists and defies all kinds of conceptual units that much scholarship relies on, especially binary opposites like national/global, vernacular/cosmopolitan, or modern/traditional. Comparatively, Griswold has described the Nigerian literary scene as a 'Nigerian literary complex', rather than a 'literary system', since its multiple parts do not necessarily fit together in a systemic way (Griswold 2000, 25). This literary complex is 'global as well as local', linking people and places around the world, while the novel itself is not something superimposed from the outside but a literary form that 'Nigerians have been reconstructing', using 'both Nigerian and Western blueprints' (Griswold 2000, 25).

In this book, I use the concept *creolized aesthetics* to capture interconnectedness in world literature. Originating in linguistics, anthropological theories on cultural creolization denote a dynamic process of cultural complexity whereby cultural elements of different spatiotemporal origins coalesce, within the parameters of a global political economy of asymmetric power structures (Hannerz 1996, 1987). More recently, creolization has re-emerged as a key concept in discussions of conviviality and cultural diversity (Hemer et al. 2020; Eriksen 2020), emphasizing the relational ontology of Glissant's earlier conceptualizations (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2020). Although often associated with the Caribbean, in anthropological theorizing creolization has wider applicability,

denoting global phenomena (e.g. Eriksen 2020; Hannerz 1987; Uimonen 2012), while recognizing the African roots of creolization (see also Mulira 2015). Through the concept creolized aesthetics, I adopt a globalectical reading of world literature, highlighting the 'mutual containment of hereness and thereness in time and space' (Thiong'o 2014, 60). In so doing, I am inspired by 'the aesthetics of decolonization' (Thiong'o 2014, 8), while hoping to contribute to the 'decolonization of aesthetics' (Mignolo 2018a, xii).

In thinking through creolized aesthetics, I am epistemologically indebted to Nigerian women writers and scholars. When during our interview in Abuja Eugenia Abu referred to herself as a 'jollof writer', to describe her writing in all kinds of genres, the word stuck in my mind. When I read Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's authoritative monograph, *Africa Wo/Man Palava. The Nigerian Novel by Women*, I was intrigued by her description: 'the novel by African women is palava sauce, with numerous ingredients thrown in from the African and Western worlds' (1996, 118). Trained in transnational anthropology by Ulf Hannerz, whose theories on creolization were inspired by his early fieldwork in Nigeria, I interpreted these culinary metaphors of mixing different ingredients in terms of cultural creolization. My attention to scholarly insights by way of tasty food was further inspired by Paul Stoller's classic work *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989), not to mention my experiences of Nigerian cuisine, which Nigerians have every reason to be proud of. Leaving food aside, these culinary metaphors are telling of the cosmopolitan creativity of Nigerian women writers and the scholarly holism of Nigerian female scholars, which I hope this monograph can convey, as I try to spice up world literature studies with some African womanism.

To decentre and decolonize theory building, I rely on vernacular theory, more specifically African womanism. Phillips has described womanism as a social change perspective with distinguishing characteristics: anti-oppressionist, vernacular, nonideological, communitarian and spiritualized (Phillips 2006, xxiv). While womanism as an alternative to feminism is usually attributed to Alice Walker, womanism in African contexts differs from the African-American model in significant ways (Ogunyemi

1996, 133; Phillips 2006).[2] The womanist theory I use in this book builds on Ogunyemi's conceptualization, which draws on gender roles and relations in Nigerian contexts, underscoring gender complementarity and communal cooperation, while emphasizing motherhood. It is worth noting that Ogunyemi refers to her vernacular theory as Nigerian womanism as well as African womanism (e.g. Ogunyemi 1996, 106), thus illustrating the entangled crossroads of a literary scene that readily identifies itself as being *both* Nigerian *and* African, while her conceptualization of women writers as *griottes* brings forth the interlinkages between traditional storytelling and literary creativity. In addressing the 'need to define African womanism', Ogunyemi recognizes that 'feminism and African-American womanism overlook African particularities', whereby sexism is but one of many oppressive sites along with 'totalitarianism, militarism, ethnicism, (post)colonialism, poverty, racism, and religious fundamentalism' (Ogunyemi 1996, 114). By conceptualizing womanism from an African perspective, Ogunyemi's vernacular theory holds great explanatory value, which is highly suitable to my analysis, especially my elaborations on Flora Nwapa, who identified as a womanist. Moreover, seeing that womanism 'openly acknowledges a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, livingkind, and the material world are all intertwined' makes it particularly applicable, while I recognize that its endorsement of the reality and importance of the spiritual world is 'perhaps the most unique and potentially

[2] While tracing the origins of womanism to Alice Walker's short story 'Coming Apart' (1979), in *The Womanist Reader* (2006, xx), Phillips recognizes 'at least two additional progenitors', namely Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's *African Womanism* (1985) and Clenora Hudson-Weems's *Africana Womanism* (1993). Ogunyemi herself notes that she 'arrived at the term "womanism" independently and was pleasantly surprised to discover that my notion of its meaning overlaps with Alice Walker's' (Ogunyemi [1985] 2006, 28). Phillips clarifies that 'womanism is not feminism', nor is it black feminism, underlining that '[u]nlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action' (Phillips 2006, xx–xxi).

controversial' characteristic of womanism as a critical theory (Phillips 2006, xxvi).

By bringing forth Nigerian women writers and *femininity*, I hope to counterbalance masculinist canonization and scholarship in world literature. Based on reviews of anthologies of literary history, Castillo has concluded that 'the gender of literary history is indisputably masculine' (Castillo 2012, 394). Not only is the number of women authors featured in literary history much smaller than male authors, but gender tends to be categorized with clusters like indigenous and non-Western (Castillo 2012, 400–401). This suggests the perpetuation of masculist centralism, with some female tokenism thrown in for good measure (Spivak 1998, 145). Such gender imbalance is particularly evident in the 'monocultural, homosocial literary canon' and the 'preeminence of canonical "masterworks" in comparative study', which are primarily male-authored (Higonnet 2009, 139–40). This male-bias is unfortunately common in world literature scholarship as well, which has been rather silent on gender and race, even in the age of digital humanities (Bergenmar and Leppänen 2017). Indeed, scholars have concluded that '[g]ender might possibly be the elephant in the room in world literature' (Helgesson and Rosendahl Thomsen 2020, 162). By contrast, there is a vast scholarship on gender and women writers in African literature, which this monograph builds upon.

By focusing on Nigerian women writers and *spirituality*, I also hope to nuance the materialist obsession in world literature studies, bringing forth sacred engagements in literary worldmaking. It has been ascertained that 'deep engagement with contextual factors' is becoming increasingly pertinent to appreciate literary production in today's globalized world (Julien 2015, 25). While deep engagement makes for more laborious scholarship, it brings considerable epistemological gains. In *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, the first ethnographic study of Igbo society by an Igbo anthropologist, the Igbo world is introduced by way of cosmology, underlining the dual existence and interrelatedness of material and spiritual worlds (Uchendu 1965, 11–12). Over half a century later, it is telling that Chigozie Obioma introduces his second novel, *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019), with a graphic chart of Igbo cosmology, culturally contextualizing his story narrated

by a *chi*, which he describes as a guardian spirit. Comparatively, in her analysis of Nigerian women writers, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1996) starts with an elaborate discussion of Igbo and Yoruba cosmology and the interlinkages between *chi* and literature to contextualize her vernacular womanist theory. Spiritual complexity is also evident in Flora Nwapa's literary worldmaking, not least the female deity Ogbuide, who she invoked throughout her literary oeuvre and who is central to my own analysis (e.g. Jell-Bahlsen 1995, 2007, 2016; Nnaemeka 1995; Ogunyemi 1995, 1996).

Nigerian writers' and scholars' insistence on deep engagements with their cultural and spiritual worlds directs our scholarly gaze to literary worldmaking in the *pluriverse*. Building on Ingold's theorizing on one world anthropology, a one world conceptualized as an emergent pluriverse (Ingold 2018, 169), I suggest a reconceptualization of world literature along the lines of a *pluriverse of aesthetic worlds*. As scholars and activists around the world are recognizing the urgency of reworlding, calling for a 'a world of many worlds', a *pluriverse* of 'heterogeneous worldings' and 'entangled worlds' (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 4), it would seem that literary worldmaking gains even greater saliency. Escobar's emphasis on transition discourses, relational ontologies and cosmologies of liberation attuned to spirituality are particularly applicable to my analysis of literary worldmaking in relation to the pluriverse (Escobar 2018), even more so given his recent effort to unthink the dualist ontology of global capitalism and Western modernity, and search for different notions of 'the real/possible and other practices of world making' in relational ontologies that show how 'all existence is radically interdependent' and that everything exists in 'meshworks of relations' (Escobar 2020, 4). It is especially inspiring that he valorizes cosmovisions of matriztic cultures and earth-based spiritualities (Escobar 2020), cosmologies that can be gleaned from Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worldmaking.

When appreciated through the social change perspective of African womanism, Flora Nwapa comes across as an inspiring foremother to contemporary progressive movements around the world, not least through her spiritualized politics (Ogunyemi 1996; Phillips 2006). Thus I respond with relief to the invitation to anthropology to rethink that 'much of what the discipline deemed

cultural beliefs might be *not only* such' (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 17, emphasis in original). Similarly, I nod in agreement that many scholars, including feminists, have ended up in a 'spiritual closet' through their refusal to associate themselves with the sacred, despite the fact that 'the majority of people in the world' simply 'cannot make sense of themselves without it', which is why we should 'engage the Sacred as an ever-changing yet permanent condition of the universe' (Alexander 2005, 15). Since this monograph engages with the water deity Ogbuide, I recognize the value of arts in sacred engagements, as exemplified by the multiple art forms for Mami Wata around the world (Drewal 2008). If anything, I would postulate that literature offers a privileged form of engagement with the sacred, since words are particularly powerful worldmaking tools that can put words on the spiritual dimensions of human existence.[3]

I approach this study of Nigerian women writers with epistemological humility and ontological openness, in the hope of avoiding some of the pitfalls of Western scholarship in African contexts. Cognizant of the ethics and politics of social science, I hope to make a contribution to ongoing efforts to decolonize social science research, including anthropology. When I started this research project, I quickly became aware of the controversies of feminism in scholarship on African literature (Uimonen 2016). Much of the critique centred on white imperialist feminism for its one-sided gender politics (women as victims, men as oppressors) and claims to epistemological superiority (Western scientific knowledge over indigenous knowledge), which rightfully have been refuted on political and cultural grounds (e.g. Nnaemeka

[3] I use spirituality to go beyond the epistemic challenges of 'religion', which raises all kinds of problematic issues in African cultural contexts, from the colonial idea that 'Africans were pagans, a people without religion' to the 'counter discourse' that their worldview was 'profoundly religious' (Oladipo 2005, 355). Such misrepresentations are often related to the use of Western concepts, which fail to capture the complexities of worldviews in African cultures (Imbo 2005, 364). While foregrounding spirituality, I will also discuss conflicts arising from religious colonialism, which continue to wreak havoc in local cultures (e.g. Jell-Bahlsen 2008, 2011), a topic that Flora Nwapa addressed in many of her works, most poignantly in her last novel *The Lake Goddess* (Nwapa 2017).

1995). In my efforts to avoid such epistemic violence (Spivak 1988), I espouse the open-ended, bottom-up perspective of feminist anthropology, which recognizes all knowledge to be situated, embodied and partial (Haraway 1988), while refining my own feminist inclinations by way of womanism, noting that one can be *both* a feminist *and* a womanist (Phillips 2006). More importantly, rather than reproducing the universal claims of Western science, I rely on vernacular theory, in this case African womanist theory. As an anthropologist, I thus hope to make a contribution to the decentring of academic knowledge. As you will find, I rely primarily on Nigerian and anthropological scholarship to substantiate my analysis, thus leaning on the work of experts who are much more knowledgeable than I aspire to be. In so doing, I hope to attain the positionality of an 'inoutsider' whose 'empirical right' to knowledge production rests on 'hard work' and 'humility' (Nnaemeka 1995, 86).

Reviving Flora Nwapa's legacy though Efuru@50

In August 2016, a press release was circulated to media in Nigeria, announcing the Efuru@50 celebration. The press release appeared on sites like the *Nairaland Forum*, an online platform with over 1.8 million members, and the event website (www.efuru50.com). A press conference in Lagos attracted further media attention, and the upcoming event was featured in local newspapers like *The Guardian*, *The Republic* and *Punch*. The cultural significance of the event was articulated through a slogan that was repeated on various promotional materials: *Efuru@50: a celebration of Flora Nwapa, the pioneer of African women literature*.

Efuru@50 was administered by a national organizing committee as well as local organizing committees. The national committee was headed by Dr Wale Okediran, former national president of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). Well known in literary circles, Dr Okediran had been the chairman of the National Organizing Committee of *Arrow of God@50* in 2014, a nationwide celebration of Chinua Achebe's famous novel. The local committees were led by eminent academics: Prof Hope Eghagha, head of the Department of English at the University of Lagos, Prof Vicky Sylvester, head of the Department of English

Figure 1. Efuru@50 press conference banner. Courtesy of Flora Nwapa Foundation.

at the University of Abuja, and Dr Razinat Mohammed of the University of Maiduguri. The Enugu event was coordinated by Prince Paschal Mebuge-Obaa.

Targeting writers, scholars and students, the programme combined literary and academic activities. In each location, there was a competition for secondary school students as well as student dramatizations of *Efuru*. Academics were invited to present papers on various themes, ranging from 'Flora Nwapa and Feminism in *Efuru*' to general topics like 'Reconstructing Women's Literature in the 21st Century' and 'African Literature and Sexuality'.

The idea of celebrating Efuru@50 was inspired by overseas scholars who were experts on Flora Nwapa. Marie Umeh, professor emerita at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, and leading expert on Flora Nwapa's literary work, not least as editor of the anthology *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa* (1998) and author of the biography *Flora Nwapa, a Pen and a Press* (2010), discussed the idea with Flora Nwapa's children at the African Literature Association's annual conference in Atlanta in April 2016. Similarly, Professor Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, an anthropologist and filmmaker who specialized in Igbo/Oguta culture and was friends with Flora Nwapa, highlighted *Efuru* in her talk at the Igbo Conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London in April 2016. Her presentation, *Efuru@50: The Dialectics of Flora Nwapa*, was filmed and screened online.[4] Although neither scholar was able to attend the event in Nigeria, they encouraged Flora Nwapa's children to pursue a nationwide celebration.

Uzoma Nwakuche, Flora Nwapa's only son, played a leading role in the preparations. As chairperson of the Flora Nwapa Foundation, Uzoma had an official position, while being the only son gave him insights and authority. Uzoma consulted his sisters Ejine Nzeribe and Amede Nzeribe on a regular basis, but it was he who appeared in press conferences and preparatory meetings and managed the event web site. Uzoma revived Tana Press and managed the printing of the 50th anniversary edition of *Efuru* through local print shops in Abuja.

Efuru@50 took place in five different cities across Nigeria: Lagos, Maiduguri, Abuja, Enugu and Owerri. It was hosted by tertiary institutions that Flora Nwapa had been connected to in various roles, as faculty or as visiting professor. Additionally, by organizing the event in different cities, it was ensured that Efuru@50 was a national literary event.

The event attracted some 2,000 participants: a mix of dignitaries, scholars and students, as well as relatives, family and friends. The best-attended event was in Enugu, with over 700 people, followed by Maiduguri, with over 500 participants. Lagos

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcwFVXK4IZQ, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

and Abuja attracted a few hundred each, Owerri less. In each location, high-level representatives of the university, such as the vice-chancellor or dean, opened the event. In Enugu, the presence of the deputy governor augmented the political significance of the celebration. Altogether some 50 scholars prepared papers, academic treatises on Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* and African literature. Some of the scholars were well-established experts on Flora Nwapa; many more used the opportunity to delve into her work. Students were the most numerous participants: university as well as secondary school students who had participated in the writing competitions preceding the event.

The keynote speakers were renowned experts who had known Flora Nwapa personally. In Lagos, Professor Emerita Bolanle Awe was recognized with great admiration, both as an academic and as a role model for women. She had just released her latest book, *Nigerian Women Pioneers & Icons*, which detailed the achievements of Nigerian women, including Flora Nwapa (Awe 2016). In Maiduguri, the keynote was delivered by another celebrity, Zaynab Alkali, well known as the first female author in English from northern Nigeria and for her award-winning novel *The Stillborn* (1984). In Abuja, Professor Leslye Obiora, former minister of mines and steel development, delivered opening remarks, having flown in from the United States to pay respect to her auntie, Flora Nwapa. In Enugu, the well-known writer Professor Akachi Ezeigbo delivered a keynote. Reflecting their academic and literary proficiency, the keynotes combined analyses of Flora Nwapa's literary production with personal anecdotes, reminiscing about Flora Nwapa as a friend, colleague and relative, as well as female role model.

Using anthropological theory on performance and fame, in this book I treat the Efuru@50 celebration as a literary festival, which I approach as a cultural performance with multiple cultural framings of fame (Munn 1986; Turner 1987). Similarly to other parts of the world, literary festivals are becoming more commonplace on the African literary scene (Krishnan 2014), replacing book fairs (Stringer 2016), while giving renewed visibility to literature (Nesbitt-Ahmed 2017). Literary festivals in different places offer valuable insights into literary culture, celebratory events with

ritual elements that cater to various communities (Weber 2018). In anthropology, festivals are usually studied as complex ritual and political events (Frost 2016), and scholars are now interrogating literary festivals, as exemplified by a recent study of the Jaipur Literature Festival in the context of world literature (Ståhlberg 2019).

Building on Turner's theory on performance, I will approach Efuru@50 as a sacred drama in which deep values emerged through narratives of heroic deeds and morality as well as communication with transcendent beings (Turner 1987, 102). Similarly to other cultural performances, the event venues were ritually transformed for a privileged period of time, the participants forming a communitas, temporarily set apart from the wider society, while engaging in plural reflexivity in a state of liminality.[5] In this particular event, society's deepest values emerged through narratives praising Flora Nwapa's pioneering accomplishments as a female writer and publisher, collective reflections that immortalized the author. Participants were also involved in other forms of sacred engagement, from prayers to God to invocations of ancestors, thus firmly connecting material and spiritual worlds. The performance of plural reflexivity was carried out through multiple

[5] As I have discussed elsewhere, liminality can be reconceptualized as not just a state of being neither here nor there but also a state of creolization, being *both* here *and* there (Uimonen 2012). Such reconceptualizations can be productive when using classical anthropological theory, which beyond various colonial entanglements has also been constrained by the dualist ontology and binary oppositions of Western science. For instance, Turner's widely used theory on social drama built on his ethnography in what is now Zambia in the early 1950s, and he has described how his 'study of social conflict' unravelled that 'Beneath all other conflicts in Ndembu society is the concealed opposition between men and women' (Turner [1957] 1996, 89). Since this presumed opposition between men and women flies in the face of African scholars' insistence on gender complementarity, it is perhaps indicative of Turner's own cultural bias. Meanwhile, although her reflections on fieldwork in Nigeria in the early 1950s convey some common prejudices among Western scholars at the time, in her fictional autobiographical account (published under the pseudonym Elenore Smith Bowen), Laura Bohannan recalls, 'I began to wonder where I could find the oppressed, downtrodden women described by the missionaries' (Smith Bowen [1954] 1964, 34).

cultural framings, within the encompassing frame of femininity and spirituality, as will be described in this book (Turner 1987, 140–41).

I will also discuss how Flora Nwapa's name travelled across time and space, thus marking a value transformation of fame through the expansion of intersubjective spacetime (Munn 1986). In anthropological theory, fame is 'a mobile, circulating dimension of the person', an 'enhancement that transcends material, bodily being, and extends beyond the physical body but refers back to it' (Munn 1986, 105). It is particularly through the circulation of a person's name through the discourses of others that fame increases in value. While fame is a positive value transformation, the opposite can also happen, a negative value transformation through 'the subversion of positive, relatively expansive transformations' (Munn 1986, 13). In Flora Nwapa's case, her literary fame rested on her being the first internationally published female writer and the first female publisher in Africa. But, at the time of her writing, her female gender and African location were undervalued in world literature, which contracted her fame.

Efuru@50 revived Flora Nwapa's fame, as will be discussed throughout this monograph. Prior to the event, her name had partially fallen into oblivion. Her books were still read and taught in literature courses, especially in Nigeria and the United States, and her books were still sold, in Nigeria mostly as pirated copies. But her legacy paled in comparison to her fellow male writers Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Through Efuru@50, Flora Nwapa's legacy was resurrected, thus marking an important event in literary history. And, in conjunction with the literary festival, Flora Nwapa's name was also widely circulated online, thus marking the expansion of her fame into digital infinity. These are the stories that this book tries to tell.

Fieldworking in and beyond Nigeria

'Is this your first time in Nigeria?'

'Yes, but I have worked in Tanzania, East Africa, for many years.'

'Oh, then you understand how we do things here!'

'Yeh, kind of. I consider Tanzania my second home. I even built a house there this year, in a small town called Bagamoyo.'

'Ah! Then you are African!'

I was surprised by how quickly Nigerians adopted me as an African, far more readily than I was used to in Tanzania, where I am typically seen as an outsider, a *mzungu* (white person). Being referred to as an African was very flattering and I rejoiced in the generous recognition of my ties to the continent. As a newcomer to Nigeria, it was of course important to make it clear that I was not totally new to Africa, thus banking on some of my cultural capital. But I also realized that all my years in Tanzania had somehow prepared me for Nigeria, as I easily slipped into friendly joking relations with the organizing team, adapted myself to a very flexible time schedule, and patiently respected the elaborate protocol during the event. If anything, I felt quite at ease, and so did my hosts. They seemed relieved that I was not more demanding, that I adapted so smoothly and that I quickly grasped what was going on. 'You are very perceptive,' Uzoma told me. 'Well, I have been trained as an anthropologist' I responded.

Anthropologists are known to be like chameleons, adapting themselves to whatever context they find themselves in, which is how ethnographic fieldwork is made possible. It is through immersion into a given cultural context that we have a chance to grasp it from within. We observe what is going on and we talk and interact with people around us. Characterized by serendipity, fieldwork demands a high degree of flexibility (Coleman and Collins 2006a). It is a very personal undertaking, shaped by the researcher's personal and professional background and orientation, which demands a heightened sense of reflexivity (Aull Davies 2007). But fieldwork is not just about fitting in; it is primarily a qualitative method for data gathering, steered by theoretical interests and disciplinary history, which makes ethnography a theory, not just a method, and, like all science, it is also political (Nader 2011).

Although a newcomer to Nigeria, I was quite seasoned in fieldwork. This was my fourth major fieldwork project, the first dating back to 1994, alongside smaller and shorter projects over the years. As a senior lecturer at Stockholm University, my

research skills had also improved through the teaching of methods at undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition, my fieldwork in Nigeria in November to December 2016 was preceded by fieldwork in Tanzania for the same project, in July to August 2016. Thus I already had some experience of doing fieldwork among writers, attending literary events and interviewing authors.

At the core of this fieldwork is participant observation during the entire Efuru@50 celebration. When the last day of the event came to a close in Owerri, several participants remarked on how busy I had been: filming, taking photos, jotting down notes. 'You must be tired; you have worked so hard!' they remarked. None of my interlocutors saw that I also spent my evenings writing notes and emails, while searching for material online. Indeed, my mind was constantly occupied with everything going on around me. Ethnographic fieldwork essentially means that you do whatever it takes to collect as much material as possible in the time available.

I travelled with the national organizing team and Flora Nwapa's three children. The organizing team consisted of Dr Wale Okediran, former national president of the Association of Nigerian Writers (ANA); Uzoma Nwakuche, chairman of the Flora Nwapa Foundation; Isaac Attah Ogezi, a young writer; Salamatu Sule, a young poet and literary agent; Ikeogu Oke, a published poet and writer of children's books, now late; and Chinyere Iwuala Obi-Obasi, a writer and blogger. The whole team was based in Abuja and, after returning from the Lagos and Maiduguri events, they remained there, owing to inadequate travel funding. From Abuja to Enugu and Owerri I travelled by car with the children of Flora Nwapa: Ejine Nzeribe (eldest daughter), Uzoma Nwakuche (only son) and Amede Nwakuche (youngest daughter). After the conclusion of the event in Owerri, I joined Ejine and Uzoma for a weekend in Oguta. I returned to Abuja with Uzoma, who also showed me some local places in the capital. Before my departure from Nigeria, Ejine drove me around Lagos, showing me some of the city's more prosperous parts, and I also met with Wale Okediran to jointly reflect on the event.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted interviews with women writers in Abuja and Maiduguri, eight in total. Wale Okediran provided names and contact details for the writers, drawing on his network from the ANA. He told me there were over 100 women writers in Nigeria, and supplied me with a list of some 40 names. To optimize my participation at the Efuru@50 event, I selected writers who were involved in the programme as organizers and/or presenters, or physically located in Abuja, where I had some extra time. The writers I managed to interview were: Eugenia Abu, Elizabeth Ben-Iheanacho, Cecilia Kato (now late), Razinat Mohammed, Tope Olaifa, Salamatu Sule, Vicky Sylvester and Gertrude Uzoh. I contacted the writers in advance through email, explaining the objectives of my research and sharing my interview questions. In addition to taking notes, I used a voice recorder and in a few cases also a video camera during the interviews. I also had informal conversations with various people, which I noted down afterwards, along with my reflections.

Figure 2. Filming scholarly presentations at University of Abuja. Photographer unknown.

I also relied on visual methods, especially photography and video. I was taking photographs with a compact digital camera and smartphone, and filmed with a video camera borrowed from my department, occasionally with a compact camera. I was constantly lugging around a canvas bag with equipment, including notebooks and extra batteries. Having explored visual methods in earlier projects, I was keen to advance my skills (Uimonen 2012). This time around I did all the filming myself, which was quite a challenge. I noted that my filming got better by the day, and by the time we reached Abuja I could hold the camera steadily in my hands for the duration of short speeches. The photographs (over 850 in total) and videos (53 GB in total) constitute visual and audio-visual field notes, which enabled me to document more observations and narratives than time consuming written notes allowed for. Based on my footage from the event, I produced a short documentary film, *Efuru@50*, with the assistance of a video editor in Tanzania, Yaki Bozi. The film is on YouTube and is also used in this monograph.[6]

In addition to data collected during fieldwork in Nigeria, the field of this study should be understood in a broader sense, encompassing other forms of ethnographic engagement. While participant observation and interviews in specific places in Nigeria during the Efuru@50 event constitute a standard way of doing ethnographic fieldwork by *being there*, this study builds on a more open-ended appraisal of the anthropological field. Instead of delineating the field in spatial terms (place), it can be appreciated through the 'metaphor of performance' as something 'constructed out of social actions', which is 'constantly in a process of becoming', rather than 'fixed (being) in time and space' (Coleman and Collins 2006b, 12). In my case, the field is not merely the Efuru@50 event but the social relations established with interlocutors before, during and after the event, as well as relations established through literature. It may seem odd to refer to literature in terms of social relations, but literature can be compared to what has been described as 'voices in the field', capturing written rather than spoken narratives (Kristmundsdottir 2006). Since the main interlocutor in this study is the late Flora Nwapa, my research is comparable to Kristmundsdottir's

[6] Efuru@50 is available on YouTube at https://youtu.be/EndOXak9ESQ.

biographical research on Björg C. Thorlaksson, decades after her passing. While anthropologists tend to study living people with whom they can interact, she argues convincingly for the validity of biographical research in anthropology, since it requires listening to various voices in the field (typically written voices), while the analysis of 'lives already lived' demands a thorough appraisal of the person's cultural and social context (Kristmundsdottir 2006, 165). In my case, I use Flora Nwapa's literature, as well as scholarly accounts, recorded interviews and documentary films, to deepen the ethnographic data about her life work, thus complementing material gathered during the Efuru@50 event.

This broader delineation of the field has a direct bearing on my analysis, which is best seen as a cumulative process of knowledge production. When I first arrived in Nigeria, my knowledge of the country was miniscule. I had all kinds of prejudices about Nigeria, shaped by the country's negative image overseas. Prior to my travel, I read a travel novel by an expatriate Nigerian writer (Saro-Wiwa 2012), which gave me some insights into the country's recent past and contemporary social life. During fieldwork I acquired some familiarity with Nigeria, and data in the form of travel notes, field notes, photographs and video. I also collected material culture objects, from event paraphernalia to books. The authors I interviewed generously gave me some of their books, and I acquired more during the event. Additionally, I collected material online, before, during and after the Efuru@50 event, primarily from web sites, blogs and YouTube. While in Nigeria, I became Facebook friends with some of the organizers, writers and Flora Nwapa's children, and have retained online contact with them ever since. I also returned to Nigeria on two occasions, from July to August 2018 and from December 2019 to January 2020. In the process of writing this book, I have read a lot of literature, written by Flora Nwapa and the writers I interviewed in Nigeria. I have also read scholarly analyses of Flora Nwapa, including her biography, as well as literary analyses of Nigerian and African women's literature. As is often the case with anthropological research, it is through reading and writing that knowledge gained during fieldwork develops into more substantiated scientific analysis. Hopefully this monograph has some worthwhile stories to tell that can add to our knowledge of world literature.

Poetic reflections on a good journey

When I left Nigeria on 16 December 2016, after three weeks of intensive work and travel, I was overwhelmed with impressions. This was my first visit to a country of intriguing cultural complexity, with its notorious media image, yet a literary giant on the African continent. On the flight from Lagos to London I captured my reflections in a poem; the words flowed smoothly. A year later, the poem was published in the journal *Ebedi Review* in Nigeria (Uimonen 2017).

A good journey

It was all meant to come together
In the land that has seen things fall apart
In a world where the centre cannot hold

It was meant to be catalyzed
Through the joyful celebration of women
Summoned by the story of Efuru

It was meant to be explored
Through travels across the nation
From Maiduguri to Owerri

It was meant to be rooted
In the small town by Oguta lake
Anchored in the Urashi river

It was meant to be tasted
From the first *amala* to the last *suya*
Peppered snails with Hero

It was meant to be welcomed
Through greetings of mighty swords
And the breaking of *kola*

It was meant to be inspired
By charming daughters of passion
In uncle's good company

It was meant to be cultivated
Through the easy flow of words
Open hearts sharing life

It was meant to be connected
With the healing of space oddity
Breathing the full moon

It was meant to be
A good journey

Narrative structure and combination of genres

It may seem presumptuous to start writing an anthropological monograph after three weeks of fieldwork in Nigeria in November–December 2016, but this book has evolved through various engagements over a longer period of time. The idea to write a book was first suggested by one of my interlocutors, Dr Razinat Mohammed in Maiduguri: 'Paula, with all the interviews you have done, you will have enough material for a book.' As a literary scholar, she could appreciate the value of the material I had collected during my short but intense fieldwork. As I went through my data, I began to agree with Razinat. When I sat down at my battered old desk in my new house in Bagamoyo to write a book outline in January 2017, the structure and content came quite easily. I completed a first, rough outline in a day, which was very encouraging. In the following year and a half, I stayed in touch with some interlocutors in Nigeria through social media and read a considerable amount of literature and scholarly works. When I returned to Nigeria for three weeks in July–August 2018 to go through this manuscript with the women I write about, I was encouraged (and relieved) by their positive feedback. I have continued revising the text ever since, while staying in touch with friends in Nigeria, and I also revisited the country for a few weeks in December 2019 to January 2020.

Inspired by efforts to explore creative writing in ethnography, this monograph departs from some conventional formats, thus recognizing the anthropologist as writer (Wulff 2016). As we write our stories, we have a professional duty to remain true to our ethnographic material, yet, if our readers are to get a sense of the experiences that we build our analysis on, we need to capture our sensuous engagements and write with our minds as well as our hearts (Stoller 1997). When doing research about writers, the

challenge of exploring more creative forms of writing becomes even more pertinent. How else to convey their creative work?

This book combines the genres of creative non-fiction, descriptive ethnography and scholarly analysis, in an effort to make the text more accessible to academic as well as non-academic readers. In terms of disposition, the text is ethnographically elaborate and theoretically constrained, giving ample space to people, places and events, while keeping scholarly analysis within bounds. In an effort to provide a truthful account and in recognition of their contributions to this study, all people appear with their real names.[7]

Each chapter begins with travel notes, capturing my experiences as a first-time traveller in Nigeria. During fieldwork I wrote a separate text with travel notes, in the form of creative non-fiction. These travel stories captured what felt important during fieldwork, especially the highpoints that stuck in memory. In this monograph, I reproduce these travel notes to capture some of my impressions of Nigeria and to offer a more candid account of fieldwork.

Structured around Efuru@50, each chapter discusses the event in a given city, drawing on field notes, videos and photos, as well as paper presentations. At each event, select key topics are brought forward, inspired by statements and activities that caught my attention. I also use ethnographic details to elaborate on one of the theoretical frameworks of this book, namely the analysis of the literary festival in terms of cultural framing and expansion of fame.

Ethnography of the Efuru@50 event is followed by in-depth analyses of Flora Nwapa's life and work, focusing on select literary works as well as the cultural context of her literary practice. The discussion is based on close readings of her books, scholarly analyses of her works as well as interviews with and documentary films about Flora Nwapa. The analysis covers a wide range of themes: feminine storytelling and writing across genres (Chapter 1), feminism and womanism (Chapter 2), children's literature

[7] An exception is the person I refer to as James in Chapter 2, who was not aware of my taking notes of the many things he said to me, but whose perspective on life in Nigeria made an impact on me upon arrival.

(Chapter 3), publishing and war stories (Chapter 4), family and social relations (Chapter 5), and creativity in Flora Nwapa's literary oeuvre (Chapter 6). Trained as a digital anthropologist, I also discuss various aspects of digitalization throughout the book.

Each chapter contains an expose of contemporary women writers, drawing on interviews conducted during fieldwork and their published works. While these writers recognize the pioneering role of Flora Nwapa, their work also draws on other sources of inspiration and, above all, their own talent and relentless efforts to tell their stories. Inspired by earlier scholarly efforts to chronicle African women writers in their own voices (e.g. James 1990), the sections on contemporary women writers are mostly ethnographic, bringing forth the writers' own stories.

The chapters are concluded with theoretical discussions that draw on anthropological, literary and vernacular theory to contextualize and explore the central themes of femininity and spirituality in world literature, focusing on Flora Nwapa's literary worldmaking. From the outset, the concept of creolized aesthetics is introduced to capture the cultural complexity of literary worldmaking in a pluriverse of aesthetic worlds (Chapter 1), followed by a discussion of womanist worldmaking and literary ontology, with an emphasis on cosmologies of radical interdependence and relational ontology (Chapter 2). Dwelling on the social context of women's literary production, the concept literary mothering is introduced to discuss women's writing careers (Chapter 3). Focusing on digital mediations in world literature, the dynamic reconfiguration of books into different material and digital forms is discussed in relation to digital publishing (Chapter 4), while Flora Nwapa's digital afterlife is conceptualized as digital incarnations (Chapter 5). The overriding themes of femininity and spirituality are discussed in greater depth in the concluding chapter, drawing on anthropological theories on art, creativity and worlding, as well as literary theories on worldmaking, analysed through African womanism to bring forth the literary achievements of Flora Nwapa and her divine muse (Chapter 6).

The epilogue offers complementary insights into Oguta culture, based on cultural immersion during a revisit to Flora Nwapa's

hometown in July to August 2018. The ritual initiation of a titled member of Igbu society, conversations and spiritual rituals with Stella Akuzor Anozia, traditional healer and priestess of Ogbuide and Urashi, as well as interactions with various people encountered in Oguta shed further light on Flora Nwapa's lasting legacy and the cultural foundations of her literary creativity. The epilogue also serves to pay homage to Flora Nwapa and Ogbuide for inspiring the writing of this book.

As indicated in the title, through this book I am invoking Flora Nwapa. The concept was inspired by Uzoma Nwakuche's reflections in one of our WhatsApp chats on 14 July 2017. Noting how easily my writing flowed, Uzoma suggested, 'I think it's like invocation. The woman spirit is in alignment with the times and season.' I interpreted Uzoma's reflection in relation to the cultural context of Flora Nwapa's literary work, which this monograph will probe from different angles. In what came to be her last novel, *The Lake Goddess*, Nwapa spelled out one of the central tenets in Igbo/Oguta cosmology: 'We know that there is life after death and so when we die we join our ancestors and continue to live' (Nwapa 2017, 15). Published posthumously in 2017, I cherish these words as a reminder of Flora Nwapa's continued spiritual presence after joining her ancestors in 1993. The notion of life after death and spiritual co-presence of ancestors reflect an ontological reality that departs from Western worldviews in fundamental ways. Yet it is only by taking this ontology seriously that we can make epistemological sense of Flora Nwapa's literary legacy, especially the centrality of femininity and spirituality in her literary worldmaking, as she followed her *chi*, inspired by Ogbuide, the divine mother.

1. Cultural Tangles in Lagos

Kekenapep, jollof rice and power cuts

'You are not allowed to travel in those three-wheelers in Lagos! It is for your own safety!' Wale shouted at me through the phone shortly after I got back to the hotel. I was amused! He must have checked with James, my host for the day, who told him of our lunch outing. James and I had just returned from lunch by *kekenapep* (a motorized three-wheeler). We had taken a taxi to a place called Sweet Sensations and from the many dishes on display I picked jollof rice, fried plantain and fried chicken. It was delicious. The rice was so tasty, fluffy grains with spices and peas. James ordered the same for takeaway, explaining he was in a period of fasting and praying. While I ate my lunch at the diner, James found a *kekenapep* to take us back. I had been excited when I had seen them on the road; known as *bajaji* in Tanzania, it was a cheap and fast mode of transport I was familiar with. On our return we laughed and took pictures in the *kekenapep*, which I posted in Facebook, a befitting entry to my Lagos adventure. Or so I thought until Wale called me, warning me about such escapades.

When the Virgin Atlantic plane descended on Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos around 5:30 am on 28 November 2016, I was impressed by the many streetlights lining the highways. What a difference to Dar es Salaam, where streetlights are few and far between, I reflected. Surprisingly, the airport building was pretty run-down, seemingly chaotic but with some semblance of order through lines mastered by uniformed guards. As I lined up for the immigration desk, a blonde lady in front of me kindly instructed me on the procedures: you go to

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the left desk first, then you get a stamp at the next desk, then you go the right, where you will find your luggage. She was staying in Nigeria, where her husband worked, but had lived in Kenya and Uganda beforehand. 'I would go back to Kenya any day,' she declared 'but when I leave Nigeria, I will never return.' I had explained that this was my first visit to Nigeria but that I live half the time in Tanzania. 'What's the main difference?' I asked her. 'People here are aggressive,' she replied, 'so you have to be as well.' I had already read about the assertiveness of Nigerians, so her comment was no surprise. 'And you can always pay your way if you want to go ahead.' She pointed discreetly at people pressing past us in the queue. Eventually we got our passports duly stamped and could wait for our luggage. The belt marked with our flight was empty, but another belt, with no sign, carried luggage from our flight. Passengers pressed forward, grabbing their heavy bags off the belt. 'You will need to show your luggage tag at the counter over there,' the friendly English woman explained to me, 'but don't pay them anything.' When I passed the customs, the officer asked for a gift, which I kindly but firmly declined. While lining up for immigration, I had noticed large posters encouraging people to report corruption. Land of contrasts and contradictions.

James waited for me with a large hand-drawn sign: Dr Paula Uimonen. I smiled as I walked up to him. He had already tried calling me, but my phone was still off, I explained. I asked him about changing money and he immediately took me down a side street to some money changers. He haggled with one man, but decided to go further down the lane to some small stands in the back. We got the same rate there, 460 naira per dollar. I changed 200 dollars and got a bundle of naira in small denominations of 500-notes. 'They are easily dispended,' James advised me. We walked back to the airport exit, where the driver showed up in a beaten-up old van. I chose the back seat so I could marvel at the view undisturbed.

The roads leading to town were run-down and lined with derelict, low buildings. I was taken aback. Lagos looked worse for wear than Dar es Salaam, yet Nigeria was one of Africa's richest countries. It did not make sense. Some of the buildings seemed to date back a few decades; undoubtedly stylish and modern at the

time, now just dilapidated. This part of Lagos came across as a city of halted development, decades of neglect, with very few signs of hope or aspiration. 'It's our leadership,' James explained, 'We have so much embezzlement.' During the one-hour drive to the hotel, he despairingly shared his views on the state Nigeria.

'If Nigerians could travel somewhere without needing a visa, 150 million people would leave this country.' Life was hard for many, although there were also pockets of luxury: 'There are places here where you can't believe you are in Nigeria.' The new president was cracking down on corruption, going for past leaders and officials, insisting on repayment. Meanwhile, the country was at a standstill in a recession. The naira had drastically dropped in value and had not yet regained it. 'We import everything, even toothpicks.' Manufacturing had never taken off, owing to poor administration and infrastructure. Power cuts were frequent. 'We don't have enough megawatts. We still produce the same amount as we did decades ago, but the population has grown.' Meanwhile, changes in lifestyle required more power, modern amenities like refrigerators, TV sets and mobile phones. I asked how Nigeria compared with neighbouring Ghana. 'Ghana is doing ok: even though we are much bigger, their economy is stronger.' How about Chinese investors? 'There are so many Chinese here; they are constructing everywhere.' But foreign investment was not without some drawbacks. 'I don't understand why we need to bring in expatriates for everything. Why can't we manage by ourselves?'

The money expressed the recession in a material way, through the circulation of old, worn out notes. The stack of 500-naira notes I got from the money changer were thin notes that had passed through many hands.

The hotel room reflected the worn-down impression I had of Lagos, a far cry from its ambitious name, Wonder King Hotel and Suites. A young man asked us to fill in the registration form at the reception desk, and then carried my suitcase up a narrow flight of stairs. The room was spacious enough, chilled by a small A/C unit that had been on for a while. I quickly switched it off, preferring to get acclimatized to the warmth. Little did I know that it was one of the few times the A/C actually worked, since there

was power; most of the time the hotel ran on a generator, which could only manage the rickety floor fan, not the A/C. The room had a large bed, wooden bedstands and a wooden desk with shelves and a chair, as well as an open wooden cupboard without doors. The walls were painted in beige and light brown, with paint stains along doorframes. A small window with double curtains offered a bit of light, complementing the halogen lamp in the ceiling, the only light that worked. There were sockets on the walls, but most of them did not work either. The one socket that actually functioned was hanging loose on the wall, looking as if it was going to fall off anytime. A flat-screen TV was mounted on the wall, offering a choice of six channels, of varying quality of grainy screens. The bathroom had an elevated shower stand, the tiles worn down, and a small sink that had seen better days. Surprisingly, the water pressure was good and I enjoyed a cooling shower after some rest. There was also a small balcony, overlooking rusty roofs and satellite dishes.

The staff did their best to make up for the lack of amenities with friendly and forthcoming service. The man who carried my suitcase happily ran downstairs to get me a bottle of water, and again to get change for my 500-naira note. The bottle was served on a large plastic tray, costing no more than 100 naira. After a while I heard a phone ringing and to my great surprise I discovered an old landline phone on one of the bedstands. It was the receptionist, who just wanted to make sure that I was ok and to call if I needed anything. When I later called him about problems locking the balcony door, he swiftly appeared at the door. After carefully checking the door, which he admitted did not work so well, he showed me how to lock it by forcing the handle up. Improvised maintenance, so common in African cities.

After some time, I got used to the room, and, since it only cost 10,000 naira per night, I could not complain. This was also where the conference organizers were going to stay. I expected them in the afternoon, but they only boarded the plane in Abuja around 7 pm. 'We will be there within 2 hours,' Wale said optimistically when he called from the boarding gate in Abuja. The conference was run on a low budget and I appreciated the effort in finding sufficient comfort at a low price, in the vicinity of the University of Lagos (UNILAG). This was certainly not a case of spending

loads of money on luxury hotels, which was often the case with development conferences of various sorts, sponsored by international donors.

I called Mom and some friends in Sweden and Tanzania on SkypeOut through my phone and the connection was really good. Sent messages through WhatsApp and replied to comments on my Facebook posting. Internet access was cheap and fast in Lagos. Great progress.

In the afternoon, after a short but heavy rainfall, James took me to the university campus in the van that had now been fixed by the driver. The rattling noise was gone and the driver drove at normal speed. The campus was not far away, although I soon lost my sense of direction. The arched campus entrance had an ambitiously large sign, along with a billboard declaring the university's mission. We drove around various parts, the streets neatly lined by tall palm trees. The buildings were of various quality, mostly rundown, but a few were more recent and in better condition. The Faculty of Creative Arts had fantastic murals and amazing sculptures, while the School of Communication could boast Africa's first Pulitzer-winning journalist. Clearly there was considerable talent at UNILAG.

The following morning we left the hotel just after 8 am, all scrambling into the van: the national organizing committee of six people and me. As we were waiting for Wale, I had a chance to meet the others: Salamatu Sule, a writer I had emailed before arrival; Ikeogu Oke, a poet and publisher; and Uzoma Nwakuche, the son of Flora Nwapa. The night before I had met Chinyere Iwuala Obi-Obasi, writer and blogger, and the poet Isaac Attah Ogezi for a drink at the hotel's lounge, shortly after their arrival around 10 pm. They were amused by my *kekenapep* story, which Wale had instantly shared. As we were waiting for the team to assemble, Chinyeri was cracking witty jokes and someone pointed out that she also worked as a stand-up comedian. During the short ride to the campus, there was a lot of joking in the team. We had breakfast at a simple cafeteria on campus, a small place serving jollof rice, fufu, meat, fish and spicy sauce. I opted for jollof rice and fried plantains, following Chinyere's advice. It was the first of many breakfasts I got to enjoy, as I learned that Nigerians prefer what is called morning food.

As we parked the van outside the event venue, the University of Lagos Staff School Hall, Uzoma excitedly called out: 'There's my sister!' He scrambled out and walked briskly to a beautiful lady with long, thin braids: Amede. They hugged. The organizing committee greeted her warmly and we took group photos in front of a colour banner on the wall announcing the event. We then entered the spacious hall, which was still empty, save for a few girls managing a book stand at the entrance. Some school children soon arrived and walked to the rows upfront.

Another lady appeared, warmly greeting everyone, introducing herself as Ejine, the eldest of Flora Nwapa's children. We chatted for a while; she came across as very open and frank. 'What a sophisticated family,' I thought to myself when I saw the three siblings together, 'and so warm and loving.' Flora Nwapa's children had been brought up well: humble and kind in their disposition, yet very accomplished professionals. Ejine was trained in theatre and specialized in management training, Uzoma was a lawyer, business developer, and poet, while Amede was a well-established fashion designer. Quite a legacy.

Cultural framing of fame at Efuru@50

The UNILAG programme started almost on time, shortly after 10 am, with Chinyere Iwuala Obi-Obasi as the MC, confidently introducing the programme and calling up people to the high table, one by one and to applause from the audience. The organizing committee chairperson, the keynote speakers, distinguished guests and the three children all sat at the high table on the podium, eight people altogether. The table was on an elevated stage in the front of the hall, decorated with a shiny white tablecloth and artificial flowers in pots. The ritualistic aspects were distinct: a high degree of formality with pronounced social hierarchies, mixed with joking and social commentaries. The participants in this elaborate performance seemed totally at ease, quite accustomed to the social and cultural requirements, not least the religious framing of the event, which was omnipresent. When the high table was filled, Ejine proceeded with a prayer. Dr Bisi Fayemi, expert on gender studies, then delivered an opening address, emphasizing self-reliance in the life and work of Flora Nwapa.

Next on the programme were the finals of the school competition, with eight students seated on rows of chairs below the stage, answering quiz questions, their responses noted by three judges. A prize giving ceremony was arranged on stage, with Ejine handing out prizes to the winners in Efuru@50 event bags. But, before that, Professor Bolanle Awe, historian and writer, delivered her keynote.

As Professor Awe made her way to the podium, she was welcomed by a long applause, a sign of tribute to a woman whose age and accomplishments commanded respect. Dressed in an elegant gown and elaborate headdress, Professor Awe was short and thin, yet the respect awarded to her made her larger than life. She greeted the chairperson and distinguished members of the high table and audience with soft-spoken eloquence and congratulated the organizing committee 'for putting up this wonderful event'. Predicting its cultural significance, she underlined, 'I know this event is going to be more and more significant as the time goes on; this is only the beginning and I am happy the hall is gradually filling up.' With a microphone in her hand, she proceeded to read her paper, peering through her glasses, looking up at the audience from time to time. Her paper combined factual analysis with personal anecdotes. She recalled meeting Flora Nwapa at CMS Secondary School in Lagos, 'the oldest secondary school in Nigeria', when Flora Nwapa and Mercy Oriuwa came from a girls' school in Elelenwa in South Eastern Nigeria to join the school in Lagos in 1949–50:

> Their presence lent a cosmopolitan air to our school and we were privileged to interact for the first time with girls from eastern Nigeria. At that time you had schools where you didn't have the opportunity of interacting. You only heard that there were Igbos and there were Hausas […] and so on and you lived in Lagos so you went to school where there were mostly Yorubas. But we had that opportunity of interacting with two girls from south eastern Nigeria.

After sharing some memories of Flora Nwapa, especially her dimples, smile and kindness, Professor Awe briefly recounted highlights in Nwapa's illustrious career, while dwelling on her accomplishments as writer and publisher.

> In 1977, she took up the challenge of publishing, which had been the preserve not only of men but largely of foreign publishers. […] Before she did that no woman had ever tried to do it in Nigeria. And in addition to that, in fact before then, we only had foreign publishers publishing books in this country. What I'm saying is that you should realize her contributions in that field as well. [loud applause]
>
> *Efuru*, her first book, her first novel, was published in 1966 by Heinemann's African Writers Series. It was the 26th in the series, but it was the first novel to be published by an African woman. [Looks up at the audience, finger raised] What I'm saying there is that before that there had been 25 other books published in that series by African writers; hers was the 26th, but it was the only book to be published by a woman. [loud applause]
>
> It won great acclaim and attracted world attention. […]
>
> It was reprinted in 1969, it was reprinted twice in 1970, again in 1973, again in 1975, and again in 1978, and again reprinted in 1986 [applause] and again in 1989.
>
> It has been translated into many languages. It was translated into French, it was translated into Dutch, it was translated into German and it was even translated into an Icelandic language. [long, loud applause]

When Professor Awe stepped down from the podium after a standing ovation, she was treated like a celebrity. Young women flocked around her, taking pictures with her, as she slowly made her way through the auditorium. By then the audience had grown to a few hundred, mostly students but also many distinguished writers and intellectuals. The neat rows of white plastic chairs, marked MPH UNILAG, were occupied by students in school uniforms and participants dressed up for the occasion, women in elaborate gowns and men in suits or batik shirts.

The presence of literary and scholarly dignitaries marked the cultural significance of the event. From time to time the MC called out the names of the people on the high table, along with the names of other distinguished guests in the audience. This social recognition reaffirmed Flora Nwapa's elevated social status, embedded in a web of social relations that attested to the continued social agency of her literary creations.

In the highly reflexive performance of this sacred drama, the calling of names and prayers served as an important form of

witnessing, bringing in third party observers to attest to Flora Nwapa's cultural influence (Munn 1986, 115). Not only was Flora Nwapa's name invoked but also the names of socially significant individuals, thus affirming her fame and its expansion of intersubjective spacetime through a web of social relations. Through prayers, God was invoked, which affirmed the intertwinement of material and spiritual worlds. Through witnessing, the contraction of Flora Nwapa's literary fame could be countered, thus overcoming the negative value transformation that she had faced in male-dominated canon formation.

At the back of the hall was a table with some of Flora Nwapa's books for sale, with the 50th anniversary edition of *Efuru* on prominent display. Next to it was a table with gift bags, laminated paper bags with a colour image of the original cover of *Efuru*: a drawing depicting a woman standing in a canoe filled with goods, steering it with a long oar, with *Efuru* and 'Flora Nwapa' in large bold letters on top. The gift bags contained the programme, a book of abstracts, a notebook and a pen, all bearing the event logo: an photo of a smiling Flora Nwapa superimposed on a map of Nigeria and the words 'Efuru@50 National Celebrations' in a

Figure 3. Efuru@50 gift bags. Photograph by author.

stylish font, followed by '50 years of Efuru, a celebration of Flora Nwapa, Pioneer of African women literature'.

These ritual objects framed the sacred drama, symbolizing the continued presence of Flora Nwapa, immortalized through her books. The book stand was a material expression of the ritualized commemoration of the author, a bordered space marking the cultural mode of framing through which the temporarily formed communitas could engage in retrospection (Turner 1987, 140). The books served as material symbols of this cultural framing, sacred objects that offered participants the opportunity to scrutinize, assess and revalue the life and work of Flora Nwapa. Through her books, Flora Nwapa was resurrected, literary material objects that mediated between the living and the dead. Her portrait photo was embedded on book covers and event paraphernalia, thus expanding fame through the circulation of her name and face, the two centres of her personal identity (Munn 1986, 106).

After a short poem vigorously performed by the female poet Adeyemi, it was time for paper presentations by scholars. The paper session started around 12:30 and by then the audience had dwindled in numbers, from some 200 to 60. Some of the distinguished guests on the high table had departed; others roamed around the room, making phone calls and attending to other matters. The papers were presented in brief; presenters were only allotted some 15 minutes each. It was difficult to hear what they said, as many spoke very fast and the acoustics were poor. The sound system in the hall was sub-standard, with muffled sound and echoes. By contrast, the air-conditioning was working at full power, blasting chilly air into the large hall. I regretted not bringing a shawl, as I shivered whenever I sat still. There was some relief during power cuts, but within minutes generators were turned on. My glasses fogged up when I finally stepped outside.

As the programme was drawing to a close, Isaac was called on stage to give a brief summary and the audience was then asked to share their views and reflections through an open microphone. A young lady spoke up, facing the audience from the front of the hall while reflecting on gender. Another young lady with her hair in dreads, a writer and blogger, volunteered to speak after some prodding. She emphasized the significance of literature.

The event was concluded with a short statement by Uzoma, elaborately thanking everyone and sharing some personal reflections. Dressed in a knee-long black shirt, with matching trousers and shoes, his aristocratic posture was enhanced by his height, as he casually leaned over the podium, microphone raised in his hand:

> It's been a journey for my sisters and I, twenty-three years after our Mom passed away. You know, to celebrate a woman is like celebrating birth, celebrating life. Ahh, you know when you talk about born, to be born, to bear; these are all words that are related to women. So you cannot talk about life without talking about woman. And in the sphere of African literature, we just happen to be born by a woman that we are just realizing is as important as she is.

Uzoma's recognition of his mother's eminence underscored the cultural value of witnessing, thus validating the spatiotemporal expansion of Flora Nwapa's fame. For Uzoma and his sisters, this intersubjective expansion meant a value transformation in their intimate social relations with their mother, now reconfigured as a famous writer whose lasting legacy was firmly embedded in a social world of acclaim; her name entrenched in discourses of praise.

By connecting women, birth and life, Uzoma expanded his mother's fame even further, underlining the universal essence of human existence, while building on values that are deeply entrenched in Igbo/Oguta culture. His discourse reflected the primacy of motherhood in Igbo culture, which is firmly rooted in Oguta cosmology, epitomized in the Goddess of the Lake, a female divinity also referred to as Our Mother or Great Mother. Uzoma's recognition of the life-giving power of women thus spoke to universal values as well as local beliefs, his tribute echoing essential features in Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worlds.

Through these words, the femininity and spirituality of Flora Nwapa's life work was brought forward, a moral universe that recognizes women as life givers, which I interpret as the encompassing cultural frame of the sacred drama of Efuru@50. As an encompassing frame, it set the tone for the celebration, expressing 'the "ultimate" meaning of the event', thus intensifying the reflexivity of a highly ritualized performance that served as a commentary on 'the mainstream of social existence' (Turner 1987, 140).

It is highly significant that these reflections were articulated by her son, a man, thus underlining the complementarity of men and women in Nwapa's social and literary worlds.

Feminine storytelling and masculinist literary canons

> They saw each other fairly often and after a fortnight's courting she agreed to marry him. But the man had no money for the dowry.[8] He had just a few pounds for the farm and could not part with that. When the woman saw that he was unable to pay anything, she told him not to bother about the dowry. They were going to proclaim themselves married and that was that.
>
> Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself. Her husband was not known and people wondered why she married him. (Nwapa 2016, 7)

With the opening lines of *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa made African and world literary history, a novel with a female protagonist, narrated by a female writer. In *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa depicted women in a variety of roles and settings, from the virtuous Efuru to the malignant gossiper Omirima, not to mention the female deity Uhamiri (also spelled Uhammiri), the Woman of the Lake. Yet, as much as Nwapa's narrative voice was carried by female characters, women were portrayed in relation to men. Starting with her elopement in the opening of the book, Efuru's relations with her husbands in two consecutive marriages was a central theme, as was her close relationship with her father. But the story was told from a woman's perspective, which was quite revolutionary at the time.

'When I started writing *Efuru*, these stories just came to me, naturally,' Flora Nwapa recollected in the Norwegian documentary film *Forfatterinne idag: Flora Nwapa* (*Female Writers Today: Flora Nwapa*) (NRK TV 1987, 16:14–16:20).[9] *Efuru* was inspired by stories that Flora Nwapa had heard from women in her village, where she had lived until she went to secondary school. In the

[8] What Flora Nwapa translated as dowry is commonly described as bride price, and in her second novel, *Idu*, the writer used the term 'bride price' instead (Nwapa 1970).

[9] https://tv.nrk.no/serie/forfatterinne-i-dag/1987/FOLA00000687/avspiller, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

interview she described how her mother worked as a dressmaker, after retiring from teaching upon marriage, and that many women came to her and talked with her. Since she helped her mother with turning the handle of the sewing machine, Flora Nwapa had many opportunities to listen to and observe the many women who visited, talking about their lives with their husbands and many other things. Although she did not realize it at the time, these stories inspired her own storytelling, as was the case with many other women writers, who drew on the stories of their foremothers (e.g. Nnaemeka 1997; Ogunyemi 1996; Umeh 1998a).

Through *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa gave voice to women in African literature, placing them at the centre of literary storytelling. At the time, most novels were written by men, with male protagonists, their portrayal of women often negative or marginal. In an interview with Marie Umeh, Flora Nwapa reflected on her counter narrative:

> I attempt to correct our menfolks when they started writing, when they wrote little or less about women, where their female characters are prostitutes and ne'er-do-wells. I started writing to tell them that this is not so. When I do write about women in Nigeria, in Africa, I try to paint a positive picture about women because there are many women who are very, very positive in their thinking, who are very, very independent and very, very industrious. (Flora Nwapa, cited in Umeh 1995, 27)

Through her literary representation of women, Flora Nwapa became known for her commitment to women's rights, which is well recognized in scholarly appraisals of her work. In an early anthology on 20 Nigerian women writers (Otokunefor and Nwodo 1989), Flora Nwapa is acknowledged for the 'unique position of being the first Nigerian female novelist whose work was published' and her 'commitment to the cause of women' (Mojola 1989, 19, 27). In the authoritative anthology *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, scholars underline Nwapa's woman-centred storytelling, concluding that 'Nwapa's central ideology' was 'female autonomy, self-fulfillment, and economic independence' (Umeh 1998b, 13). More recently, Bolanle Awe has recognized Flora Nwapa as one of Nigeria's 34 women pioneers and icons, underlining that she was 'popularly known for championing the fight of discrimi-

nation against women in our society, she being a devoted women's rights activist' (Awe 2016, 55).

To appreciate Nwapa's literary achievements, it is worth putting her feminine storytelling in the context of African and world literary canon formation. Honoured as the 'Mother of African Women's Writing', Flora Nwapa has been described as a 'trailblazer' in the 'world literary canon' (Umeh 1998b, 9), having 'brought a new literary canon from Nigeria and presented it to the world for its perusal' (Mills 1998, xvii). *Efuru* was the 26th novel in the canonical Heinemann African Writers Series, yet the first to be written by a woman, as Bolanle Awe underlined at Efuru@50. Nwapa's second novel *Idu* (1970) was published as number 56 in the series, yet she remained the only woman writer until Bessie Head's *Maru* (1972) was published as number 101 in the series. Out of 270 numbered titles published in the series from 1962 to 1987, only 14 titles were written by women, more specifically by 10 different women writers from eight different countries (Currey 2008, 301–8).[10]

Similarly to the masculinist orientation of world literary canons, African literary canon formation was dominated by male writers, editors and publishers, as well as male literary scholars and critics. At the time, African literary actors were intent on decolonizing African literature (e.g. Thiong'o 1986), their critical eyes turned to imperial centres, yet paying little or no attention to women writers (e.g. Chinweizu et al. 1983). As noted by Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo, 'in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* the authors mention Ama Ata Aidoo and Flora Nwapa; but very much *en passant*, as an afterthought' (Aidoo 1988, 161). She described a situation in which African commentators 'manage[d] to convey—solidly—to the interested world community, an impression that either there are no African women writers around at all, or if there are, then their work is not deserving of serious critical attention', which resulted in a lack of attention from literary critics that 'damaged the career of so many women writers'

[10] They were: Mariama Bâ (Senegal), Charlotte Bruner (US), Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Nadine Gordimer (South Africa), Bessie Head (Botswana), Doris Lessing (UK/Zimbabwe), Martha Mvungi (Tanzania), Rebeka Njau (Kenya), Flora Nwapa (Nigeria) and Alifa Rifaat (Egypt).

(Aidoo 1988, 162). In her discussion of gender politics in the African literary canon, Stratton has underlined the double bind of women writers: they were rendered invisible, while their works were trivialized and distorted by literary standards that were both 'Euro- and androcentric' (Stratton 1994, 6). Not surprisingly, critical scholars have underlined that recognizing women writers in African literary history would mean a thorough revision as it would 'force a reconception of its central canon' (Wilson-Tagoe [1997] 2017, 13).

Flora Nwapa reflected on the negligence of African female writers in various interviews. For instance, in the Norwegian documentary film, when asked if female writers in Nigeria had the same status as male writers, she responded (NRK TV 1987, 25:25–26:59):

> I am afraid not and this is what we keep saying when we attend conferences, even in Nigeria: that the men seem to ignore us. Critics, the male critics, don't bother to study our works. [Interviewer: To write about you, or what?] To write about us. And we keep telling them that where they come from, there were women and therefore, they should take us into account. Creative writing is something that not everybody can have. But the writers, many writers, thrive on controversy. If you don't write about my work, how could I know that people appreciate what I am doing? It's when you criticize some people that they come out with their best. *You are willing a writer to die if you don't talk about her writing*. This is what Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and myself, this is what we keep hampering on, that Nigerian male writers are not helping us at all.

Despite her pioneering role, Flora Nwapa's marginalization in literary canon formation constrained her literary career, even killing her voice globally. In addition to being ignored by Nigerian writers and critics, her international publisher did little to promote her. As an African woman writer, she experienced 'multiple marginality' from Heinemann, since the publisher did not bother promoting or distributing her books (Umeh 1995, 22). Even in the retrospective *Africa Writes Back*, Flora Nwapa is recognized as a 'skilled story-teller' and 'the first writer to put women at the centre', yet her work is belittled by the comment 'although her early heroines tend to emerge as "worshipful servant-wives to erring husbands,"

as *The Companion [to African Literature]* put it' (Currey 2008, 43). This discrimination had dire consequences for her literary career: 'According to Nwapa, Heinemann's placing her in the literary backwaters resulted in the piracy of her books locally and the death of her voice globally' (Umeh 1995, 22). Rather than accepting this structural marginalization, Flora Nwapa set up her own publishing house, as discussed in Chapter 4. Even so, before Efuru@50, Flora Nwapa's works had 'partially gone into deep freeze on the world scale' (Salami-Boukari 2012, 8).

The marginalization of women in literary history is comparable to how women have been rendered invisible in academic canons in general, as exemplified by anthropology. In 1995, feminist anthropologists published *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon 1995), in response to the crisis in anthropology following *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Focusing on the politics and poetics of anthropological writing, *Writing Culture* stirred vigorous debate on the question of cultural representation, calling for more innovative and experimental forms of writing, to 'decolonize the power relations inherent in the representation of the Other' (Behar 1995, 4). The glaring omission of women's contributions to anthropological writing was not taken lightly by feminist anthropologists. *Women Writing Culture* offered another history and another canon for anthropology, bringing forth women's writings, while challenging the discipline's 'prestige hierarchy' and its '(male) canon' (Behar 1995, 9).

Interestingly, these feminist anthropologists referred to critical debates on literary canons in the United States. They noted how anthropologists stayed silent in the debates, even though 'the literary critic, with "his" reading list of the great books of Western civilization, is a symbolic antithesis' (Behar 1995, 10). Meanwhile, they acknowledged that 'the continued lack of critical reflection about our own canon suggests that anthropology has yet to carry out the radical kind of self-examination that would bring its multicultural quest home' (Behar 1995, 11). Sadly, there is a reason why I cite these words two and a half decades later, given the current state of decolonization in anthropology, which at best can be described as work in progress (Allen and Jobson 2016; Mogstad and Tse 2018; Todd 2018; Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

The persistence of gender imbalance in world literary canons is disturbingly palpable. As Stefan Helgesson has noted, 'The male dominance in just about any version of a world literary canon is plain to see' (Helgesson and Rosendahl Thomsen 2020, 162). Ironically, Rosendahl Thomsen notes that this gender bias persists despite a mostly female readership: 'research shows that many more women read fiction than men, but we have yet to see if that spills over into changing the canon' (Helgesson and Rosendahl Thomsen 2020, 163). The world literature canon privileges male-authored novels, while undervaluing other forms like folklore and children's literature, as well as stories depicting everyday life, which are common features in women's writings (Higonnet 2009, 138–40). This hierarchical ordering is also evident in how gender tends to be categorized alongside indigenous and non-Western, thus asserting the masculinity of literary history (Castillo 2012, 394). The persistence of male-dominated literary canons can be related to how a 'masculine bias of the canon exemplifies a wider process by which hegemonic discourses—especially on gender and race—are established', a 'process of devaluation' that is clearly at work in 'domains of high culture' (Lutz 1995, 250). Research has shown devaluation and re-evaluation of the novel in Britain, which until the mid-nineteenth century was dominated by women writers: 'when women wrote them, they were low-prestige cultural items. Once men dominated the field, the novel was lauded as high art' (Lutz 1995, 250). While the 'canons of taste in cultural objects' have been challenged in many places (Lutz 1995, 260), world literary canons still remain to be revised and revalued.

A more gender-sensitive appraisal of world literature is clearly needed. Scholars have argued that gender-sensitive and feminist analyses offer effective tools for revealing the gendered power structures and ideological parameters operating in literary history and canon formation processes (Edfeldt 2019; Leppänen 2018). Such work can for instance show 'the importance of gender as a mediating category in the circulation of literature' (Edfeldt 2018, 369), while rectifying the 'absence of gender both theoretically and numerically' (Bergenmar and Leppänen 2017, 237). Since theory is gendered, raced and classed (Lutz 1995, 251), such efforts can clearly enrich scholarship, while decentring the masculist bias in

literary theory (Spivak 1988, 1998). Learning from anthropology, gender-sensitive analyses should also recognize that feminism may have its limitations. In the writing culture debate mentioned above, feminist anthropologists responded to not only the crisis in anthropology but also the crisis in feminism, especially the 'critiques of white middle-class feminism' vocalized by women of colour (Behar 1995, 3).

Nwapa's *This Is Lagos* and writing across genres

Although Flora Nwapa started her literary career writing novels, she also wrote short stories, poems and plays, as well as children's books. In my research on women writers in Tanzania and Nigeria, I have found that women writers are often inclined to write across genres, expressing their storytelling through different forms. The creative impulse seems more important than literary prestige. Writing across genres demands a more multifaceted literary talent, a gift for storytelling that is not limited to the format of the novel.

Nwapa's first collection of short stories was *This Is Lagos and Other Stories* (Nwapa [1971] 1986). First published in 1971, the book was reprinted four times. The 1986 edition, which I bought at the Efuru@50 event, was published by Tana Press Ltd in Enugu, Flora Nwapa's own publishing house. The front cover depicts a colour photograph of a young woman in a short-sleeved white dress with red prints, a large grey shoulder bag in nylon hanging loosely at her hip. The image of the woman is superimposed on a photograph of downtown Lagos, with high-rise buildings and tree-lined streets with cars and pedestrians. The cover conveys femininity and urban modernity, a theme that runs through the nine short stories.

The short stories in *This Is Lagos* deal with various aspects of urban life, primarily from a woman's perspective. In six out of nine stories, the main character is a modern urban woman who tackles the joys and demands of city life. Changing gender roles is a recurring theme, as women try to cope with demands of marriage and motherhood, while exploring new ground as urban professionals and modern spouses. They challenge established norms in various ways, not least when it comes to love relations with

men. The lead characters are generally well educated and well travelled; some have been to Europe; all of them originate from other parts of Nigeria, oftentimes the East, thus capturing internal migration and urbanization.

In 'The Loss of Eze', romantic relationships are explored through the young sophisticated Amede. At the beginning of the story, Amede drives to an embassy party, where she meets Tunde, a gentleman who catches her interest. Amede is still upset about having lost Eze to another woman, a passionate consuming relationship that she describes as 'It was an affair that took everything out of me' (Nwapa 1986, 92). Amede's sophistication is depicted through her posh house with a steward, her fancy car and her subtle manners, while her strength as an independent woman underwrites her social polish.

> So after six months of losing Eze I said to hell with him. To hell with all I held dear, I must live my own life the way I wanted it. Eze or no Eze, I must live my life fully and usefully. That week, I got an invitation from one of the embassies. I was on their list. That meant that any time there was a party or something I was invited to it. One of them had even told me once when an invitation for me came late, and I was not at the party, that I did not need to wait to receive invitations. When I heard of anything, I should jump into my car and come. It was kind and well meaning, I knew, but how many people would do that without embarrassment of a sort? (Nwapa 1986, 93)

At the party, Amede chats politely with her boss, sipping gin and tonic, lamenting the overbearing manners of Mr Bright, a brazen urbanite, while being intrigued by the neat appearance and gentle wittiness of Tendu. Unlike Mr Bright, Tendu is knowledgeable about the country beyond Lagos.

> 'Have you been to the East?' I asked Tunde.
>
> 'Not since I returned from Britain not quite eighteen months ago. I shall go to the East again when I have my leave.'
>
> 'So you have been to the East before?' Mr. Bright said.
>
> 'I went to the East when I was at school. I had an uncle in Port Harcourt, a goldsmith. I took a very old boat from Apapa to Port Harcourt. I spent a week in Port Harcourt. Then I took a train to Enugu, from there back to Lagos. I would very much like to

> visit Onitsha. I have heard to [*sic*] much about it from my friends in the D.T.C. and even when I was abroad,' Tunde concluded. My estimation of him rose high. Here is someone who is different from the others. Here is someone who did not think that Lagos was the centre of the universe. (Nwapa 1986, 98)

Amede's appreciation of Tunde's familiarity with the eastern part of the country exposes some of the internal divides that have plagued Nigeria. Limited interaction with and exposure to other parts of the country have reinforced ethnic divides inherited from the colonial era. Some elite urbanites have been oriented to metropolitan centres in the West, while maintaining a condescending attitude toward the rest of the country, thus internalizing colonial mindsets, as portrayed in Mr Bright. Amede's objection to such behaviour offers an alternative to urban sophistication and cultured manners, one that appreciates rather than rejects local culture.

By contrast, in the story 'This Is Lagos', a young woman, Soha, has just arrived in Lagos. Before leaving her home, her mother cautions her: 'They say Lagos men do not just chase women, they snatch them' (Nwapa 1986, 10). Soha lives with her aunt, who she calls Mama Eze, after the aunt's first son. They live in the outskirts of the city and Soha teaches at a nearby primary school. Soha does not like teaching, but considers the job a stepping stone.

Soha is courted by a man in a car – a brand-new car, on top of that. While she plays hard to get, using her femininity to lure him, the man seduces her with shopping and outings. Her aunt warns her against Lagos men, but to no avail. Soha keeps her love affair secret, but Mama Eze understands that she is hiding something from her. When Soha wants to move to a hostel, she forbids her, but soon enough Soha moves out secretly. She then reappears with her gentleman and finds her family and neighbour at a loss for words, as they announce that they have married.

The phrase 'This is Lagos. Anything can happen here' (Nwapa 1986, 19) captures urbanization and social change, especially in relation to women and morality. Soha is representative of young women seeking prosperity in the city, initially through a job that earns her a salary but very soon through a man who can provide her with modern conveniences and comforts. Her femininity is her primary asset, not least her sexuality, but it also challenges

social norms. Soha is pregnant when she marries her suitor, Mr Ibikunle. While the marriage saves her from the shame of being a single mother, the fact that she has eloped with her secret lover goes against traditional procedures, which involve family. In the story, Lagos is blamed for these lapses in morality, along with its Western cultural influences, thus raising critique against some aspects of metropolitan modernity.

In her analysis of *This Is Lagos and Other Stories*, Naana Banyiwa Horne argues that the collection is distinguished by the valorization of female voices (Horne 1998). In the female-centred worlds of Nwapa's authorship, the collection of stories 'constitutes a wealthy tapestry of the contemporary Nigerian world in general and of intimate female portraits in particular' (Horne 1998, 443). From her feminist perspective, Horne underlines that the voices of women imbue the characters with female agency, cast as agents of action and change, as they combat patriarchy to regain control of their lives. Horne emphasizes the significance of upward mobility, women trying to improve their social position, as when Soha who turns to a man wealthy enough to own a car as a means of self-improvement. Meanwhile, Amede's efforts to ensure that she looks good at the party is interpreted as an 'assertion of Nwapa's feminism, one that valorizes those distinct attributes of African womanhood and femininity', namely the pleasures and well-being of looking good (Horne 1998, 457).

Horne recognizes the 'tangle of entrapments' of city life (Horne 1998, 474), a tangle that has transnational dimensions. She notes that urban life lures women with Western bourgeois ideals of womanhood, which coexist with African norms and practices. In her analysis, this constitutes a 'conflation of the Western and African underpinnings of patriarchy', as women are commodified as sexual creatures as well as reproductive breeders (Horne 1998, 460–61). I would argue that, rather than representing a conflation of patriarchal ideals, the stories exemplify the cultural entanglements in the literary work of African women writers like Flora Nwapa. Far from being a conflictual encounter between clear-cut binaries, i.e. urban/rural, modern/traditional, African/Western, it is illustrative of the intricate complexities of intertwining social worlds. Through the creolized aesthetics we can get a more

nuanced reading of Nwapa's literary worldmaking, as will be discussed below, but first let me acquaint you with Eugenia Abu.

Eugenia Abu and the power of female storytelling

> I think if more writers are women, *we can stabilize the continent*, because we speak truth to power, a lot more than I think the men do.
>
> I think we feel the pain of a war, more than the men can ever understand. Because when the men decide to go to war, the people who are left to carry the can are the women and the children. Women writers are more able to express this, better than the men. Because I don't think there is a man who can express it, he doesn't know what it means. It is difficult for a man to express hunger better than a woman. A woman knows because she eats last you see, and because she gives everybody the food, and then she has to go look for the food. It's pretty much like the animal kingdom, a female lion goes hunting for the food and brings it, and then the men eat first. Very much the same thing here. A lot of women are becoming, a lot of African families are becoming female-headed households, because the men are either working in the cities or they are at war. And so women are tending to become the fathers and the mothers and socializing the children. So it's much harder. And so I think women are able from the position of how we are created biologically to tell the stories better. When a woman is divorced or when a woman is abused, sexually, physically, emotionally, she expresses it better than the male writer can ever do. And these are most of the issues that our societies are facing, domestic violence. The weaker, the more vulnerable sex is the one that is put out there to suffer untold hardships when there is a war. She is the one when there is an illness, who at a very young age doesn't go to school, because she has to look after a sick mother, the boys are not made to do that.
>
> So I think women tell the African story better. And they tell the world's stories better, all over the world, really. Because they have what it takes, they have the intuition that only women can do. And I think women, like I said, can speak truth to power. I've said it all. And we tend to be the ones that tell the next generation of children, we have the folktales, more than the men have, so can transpire it better. (Eugenia Abu)

Eugenia Abu's eloquent reflection on the role of women writers offers a powerful vision of women's storytelling. A well-known media personality who lives in Abuja, Eugenia Abu has worked as a news anchor for many years, and when we met she was executive director of programmes at the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). Although known as a broadcaster, she considers herself to be a writer – a *jollof* writer, to be more precise, as will be explained below.

I met Eugenia Abu in her office at NTA in Abuja on 13 December 2016, feeling lucky to get a 30-minute interview, which stretched to 40 minutes. I arrived a bit early; she apologized for being a few minutes late, a surprisingly punctual time awareness, undoubtedly shaped by years in broadcasting. It was clear that she had a hectic schedule, as befits a senior executive. Her spacious office was furnished with executive desks and chairs, as well as a sitting area. We sat next to each other on comfortable armchairs, my voice recorder near her arm rest. Eugenia was strikingly elegant, embodying the ideals of good-looking femininity, with flawless complexion, well-manicured hands and a fashionable gown. As a senior media professional, she carried herself with confidence and authority, eloquently answering my questions with concise precision and powerful vision, reading them off my printout as the interview progressed.

Eugenia was born in 1962 in Kaduna, northern Nigeria. Her father was a civil servant, permanent secretary of the state, and her mother was a hospital matron. Her ethnic group is Igala and her religion is Catholic. Eugenia attended both public and private schools, and she underlined that the former were very good when she was a child. She went to a federal government-supported university, Ahmadu Bello University (1981). Eugenia has two master's degrees, both from universities in the UK, the first in communication policy (1991), the second in creative writing (2011). Gifted in languages, Eugenia speaks seven languages in addition to English: her mother tongue is Igala, and she also speaks some French, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbira (her mother's language), Tiv and a little bit of Swahili, after living with some East Africans in London. Her spouse is a media consultant. In response to my question on how many children she has, Eugenia asked me, 'Did you know it was

not African to say how many children you have?' As I awkwardly burst out, 'Oh, really!?' she explained: 'Children are given by God and you shouldn't count them.' Feeling a bit stupid, I suggested she could skip the question, but she volunteered a response: six birth children, and many more young people she has mentored, who she also considers to be her children.

'Nigeria is a nation of storytellers,' Eugenia remarked, as she reflected on storytelling in her family to contextualize her own writing career. She recalled her grandfather, who was a merchant, with so many stories from his travels and how she used to sit at his feet and wonder if the stories were fables or true. Those stories became part of her life. Her mother told stories as well, especially about traditional institutions like royalty, storytelling that could go on for days. They also had a lot of folktales from their grandmother. Eugenia started writing at the age of seven. She used to draw stick people, name them as characters and create stories around them. Her father was excited, which encouraged her to start story writing. So writing 'just sort of came to me,' she concluded, adding, 'if you read a lot, writing tends to come to you.'

Jollof writer is how Eugenia is referred to, because she writes in 'all the genres'. 'I am gifted,' she reflected, in short stories, column writing, essay writing, short fiction, long fiction, screen play and poetry. '*Jollof* is a Nigerian meal, which I'm sure you tried, which is a mix of everything,' she explained, so, 'I am a writer who writes all the mixes, and all of it in English.'

At the time, Eugenia had published two books, *In the Blink of an Eye* and *Don't Look at Me Like That*, in addition to essays, columns and poems. *In the Blink of an Eye* (Abu 2007) is a collection of essays she wrote for *The Guardian* newspaper over a period of 23 years. It won the ANA/NDDC Flora Nwapa Prize in 2008 for women's writing. Some of her poems and essays have also won prizes. Her second book, *Don't Look at Me Like That* (Abu 2009), is a collection of poems, 'poetry of love and consciousness,' Eugenia reflected. The books were published by Nigerian publishers, Spectrum Books and Kraft Books Limited, both based in Ibadan, although Spectrum is a transnational publisher with offices in London and Addis. Eugenia also wrote two weekly columns in newspapers: 'Tales from the Main Road' in

Business Day and 'Five Favourite Books with Eugenia Abu' in *The Sunday Trust*. She also had a novel under way when we met.

'Life in Nigeria is a story,' Eugenia responded, when I asked about the main opportunities and challenges for writers in Nigeria. 'The storytelling is everywhere; Nigeria has a rich trope of folktales.' As for challenges, she singled out publishing: 'Maybe not enough publishing opportunities, not enough publishing houses.' She also brought up the challenge of power, as in electricity: 'Because, when the muse gets you, you have to write, and if you don't have a generator and there is no power, then that's hard.' She added, 'And not enough libraries,' thus underlining yet another infrastructural inadequacy.

Her vision of what she hoped to achieve through her writing was geared towards societal improvement and intercultural understanding:

> A writer many years ago said that writing is about seeing, entering into another person's community and getting to understand them. And when I teach writing to small groups, I say one of the things about entering another person's community is, if you meet people who are walking backwards, and you've never been to their culture, their community and seen that that's the way they walk and they are nice people, they walk backwards anyway, you never understand it. You are likely to begin to either be abusive or rude to people who are walking backwards, because we're not from that culture. So, until you understand another person's community, you can't really understand the people completely, can you?
>
> And to make community and the world and humanity a better place, to avoid the wars in Syria, we need to enter each other's communities. We need to understand Nigeria better than the international media is trying to portray, and they portrayed us in such a bad light that people don't even want to come here. If I can achieve making two persons come to Nigeria, to see how rich and beautiful my culture is, if I can tell stories of my childhood, if I can tell stories of violence against women, if I can tell stories on rape, if I can tell stories to make another person understand that rape is not acceptable in whatever form, if I can tell a story that gives somebody else pleasure, then I think I would have achieved my aim in writing. Keeping two columns, writing about lifestyle and fashion and fabric and motives in *Business Day*, and

> writing about books [in *The Sunday Trust*], means that I'm getting people to read. I get text every time: 'Can I find this book, where?' Then I have made my own contribution to national development, I want to believe, beyond which I hope my writing gives pleasure, above everything else.

Creolized aesthetics in a pluriverse of literary worlds

By invoking Flora Nwapa, I wish to explore Nigerian women writers' literature through the lens of creolized aesthetics, to help us rethink world literature along the lines of a pluriverse of literary worlds. Eugenia's jollof writing exemplifies a creolized aesthetic, a literary style that readily mixes cultural elements of different spatiotemporal origin, within the political economy of world literature. Rather than representing an imported art form, literature is seen as another version of storytelling, which is both universal and culturally specific, both cosmopolitan and vernacular. Like Flora Nwapa and many other women writers, Eugenia expresses her stories through a variety of genres, novels, short stories, plays, poetry, essays and columns, thus broadening the parameters of literary production, well beyond novels. The creolized aesthetic captures writing across genres, genders and generations as well as across social, natural and spiritual worlds, as discussed throughout this monograph. But global inequalities hamper Nigeria's literary scene, especially infrastructural inadequacies, from production (electricity, publishing houses) to circulation (libraries, reading culture). While these shortcomings are indicative of the uneven development of the world-literature system (WReC 2015), the situation is further compounded by aesthetic hierarchies in world literature (Thiong'o 2014).

Nigerian women writers privilege storytelling, thus embracing orature. Recall Eugenia's remarks: 'Life in Nigeria is a story' and 'the storytelling is everywhere; Nigeria has a rich trope of folktales'. Her emphasis on storytelling recognizes orature as a 'living tradition' that 'is always at the cutting edge of the new and the experimental in words and experience' (Thiong'o 2014, 83). A telling example of such aesthetic innovation is the digitally mediated performance poetry of Zuhura Seng'enge, a young Tanzanian poet who combines orature, literature, music and theatre (Uimonen 2018). Contrary to the logic of world literature,

which places orature and literature in a hierarchy of value, the creolized aesthetic accommodates both forms and therefore it sets 'free the richness of the aesthetic, oral or literary' (Thiong'o 2014, 85). Freed from the constraints of aesthetic hierarchies, female writers can draw on a rich tradition of orature, while experimenting with modern literary forms to capture the entanglements of life.

By valorizing storytelling, women writers can defy the market logic of the world-literature system. Notions of the extroverted orientation of African literature (Julien 2006, 2018) build on assumptions that African writers 'desire to achieve recognition', thus directing their literary production toward the global market (Huggan 2001, 35). But such generalizations do not hold. While some writers dream of international publication, not all do: 'for many writers in Nigeria, it is not the case that all literary roads lead through London or New York' (Suhr-Sytsma 2018, 344). Rather than obsessing with market value, many female writers just want to tell their stories. Privileging the story, the status of the genre is secondary, even for writers of great repute. As mentioned above, Flora Nwapa unassumingly reflected: 'I write because I have a story to tell' (Flora Nwapa, cited in Umeh 1995, 26). Similarly, the Mozambican female writer Paulina Chiziane states on her book covers: 'They say that I am a novelist and that I was the first Mozambican woman to write a novel, but I say: I am a storyteller and not a novelist […] I am inspired by the tales of the bonfire' (Paulina Chiziane, cited in Edfeldt 2018, 380).

Women writers also resist and counter patriarchal and post/neo-colonial power structures, which makes the creolized aesthetic an exemplary *aesthetic of decolonization*. Similarly to male writers like Chinua Achebe, they reject Western narratives of their history, insisting on telling their own stories, thus expressing 'aesthetics of resistance' (Thiong'o 2014, 41). But, by insisting on a space for women's storytelling, they also counter masculinist literature systems. African women's writing can thus be appreciated as a creative contribution to *both* 'changing the terms of the conversation' associated with decoloniality *and* 'changes to the content of the conversation' linked to de-Westernization (Mignolo 2018b, 112–13). As Ogunyemi has asserted, 'decolonization becomes complete with palava sauce' (1996, 105).

From a womanist perspective, women's literary storytelling holds tremendous transformative power, since 'women writers usually exhibit a sense of social responsibility in their writing. They believe in change for the sake of progress' (Ogunyemi 1996, 2). Similarly to the traditional griot, the woman writer can be appreciated as a 'master of the word', valued for 'the art of speaking well and of speaking truth', a '(re)builder of cultural identities' and 'social morals' (Ouattara 2018, 154). Compared to male griots and writers, women can be even more progressive: 'As griottes, the women writers cause imperceptible shifts in established discourses', through their 'counternarratives' they reveal 'the politics of oppression' and 'attempt to provoke wo/men into reassessing their position in society' (Ogunyemi 1996, 3–4). As Eugenia stated, 'women writers speak truth to power, a lot more than I think the men do'.

These literary interventions can be appreciated as transition discourses that craft other possible worlds (Escobar 2018, 2020). Escobar suggests that 'the most imaginative TDs [transition discourses] link together aspects of reality that have remained separate in previous imaginings of social transformation: ontological, cultural, politico-economic, ecological, and spiritual' (Escobar 2018, 68). These transition discourses often build on cosmovisions that recognize the 'radical interdependence' of all existence, like 'the great ancestral civilizations', or 'matriztic ontologies' that predate patriarchy (Escobar 2020, 14). He also outlines three principles for transition strategies: depatriarchalization and decolonization, the liberation of Mother Earth, and the flourishing of the pluriverse (Escobar 2020, 30).

I would suggest that progressive cosmovisions are also to be found in African women's literature, transition discourses that build on a long history of socially engaged storytelling, addressing various forms of oppression, while offering creative alternatives for social change. For Nigerian women writers, their 'constituency is all oppressed people', their ideology is 'collectivism as opposed to individualism', their literary sphere of 'interlingual and intercultural celebration' enriches 'postcolonial counterdiscourse' with a 'womanist ideal', addressing problems affecting the oppressed, with 'maternal grace' (Ogunyemi 1996, 103–5).

When it comes to designs for the pluriverse, Flora Nwapa comes across as an inspirational foremother, not least through the relational ontologies of her literary worldmaking. In Latin America, underlying 'many of the mobilizations of indigenous, Afro-descendant, women's, land-based and popular groups are relational worldviews', which offer 'viable alternatives to modern social and political arrangements' (Escobar 2018, 80). For example, *feminismo comunitario*, conceptualized by a feminist group in La Paz, offers a 'reinterpretation of gender (including gender complementarity) along relational, communal lines' (Escobar 2018, 80). With its critique of 'neoliberal capitalism, patriarchalism, and liberal feminisms' (Escobar 2018, 80), this communitarian feminism has interesting resemblances to African womanism, which has always emphasized gender complementarity, cooperation and community (Ogunyemi 1996), while its groundings in spirituality and environmental balance is central in womanism in general (Phillips 2006). Escobar argues convincingly that transition discourses and relational ontologies are important elements in the design for a pluriverse, which he conceptualizes in terms of 'ontological design', that is, 'the design of worlds and knowledges otherwise (decolonial thought)' (Escobar 2018, 83).

Returning to world literature, conceptualizing it as *a pluriverse of aesthetic worlds* opens up productive ways of appraising literary worldmaking. In his most recent work, Escobar underlines that 'The pluriverse refers to the idea of multiple worlds but also to the idea of life as limitless flow' (Escobar 2020, 26). Comparatively, focusing on ontogenesis in the pluriverse, Ingold elaborates on a world in movement, always becoming, describing the world as conversation, noting that 'to join the conversation, then, is to inhabit the world' (Ingold 2018, 158). Similarly, in world literary theory, Cheah elaborates that 'we conceive of the world as an ongoing, dynamic process of becoming, something continually made and remade' and world literature as 'a fundamental force in the ongoing cartography and creation of the world instead of a body of timeless aesthetic objects' (Cheah 2008, 30–31). Given this emphasis on narrative creation and incessant flow, the pluriverse comes across as a very suitable concept for world literature.

While the notion of a pluriverse accommodates the cultural diversity of aesthetic worlds, the ontogenesis of literary worldmaking begs for a more processual approach, to 'think of difference in terms of *differentiation* rather than *diversity*' (Ingold 2018, 161, emphasis in original). This is a critical distinction, since it captures the way in which parts are related to the whole, as something that emerges from within, according to the 'principle of interstitial differentiation' (Ingold 2018, 166). It also captures the perpetual movement of the world, since diversity refers to being different, while differentiation refers to becoming different.

The principle of interstitial differentiation allows us to think along the lines of *one world literature as a pluriverse of aesthetic worlds*. Although Escobar argues for relational ontology and pluriversal design as a counterforce to a hegemonic One World – a globalized capitalist, patriarchal and colonial world (Escobar 2020, 9), Ingold insists on seeing the world as one (Ingold 2018, 158). Since world literature offers insights into the ontogenesis of the world, even constituting a *force* in the making of the world, I find it productive to think along the lines of one world literature. One world literature speaks to the cosmopolitan aspirations of scholarship in world literature and anthropology (Hannerz 2007, 2016; Uimonen 2019a) but it also captures the cosmopolitan orientation of the creolized aesthetics and the transformative ambitions of womanism. Even so, we should not lose sight of the world-literature system of uneven development (WReC 2015), acknowledging that the pluriverse also captures how 'worlds are interlinked, though under unequal relations of power' (Escobar 2020, 27).

When it comes to literary worldmaking, it is worth exploring the 'ontological status' of literature (Cheah 2008, 35), by way of anthropological theory on creativity as cultural improvisation. Life is 'unscriptable' because it is 'a movement through a world that is crescent' (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 12). If life is unscriptable, what happens to literary worldmaking? The notion that the world is in constant flux, always becoming rather than ready-made, points to the fluidity of cultural imagination, as people continuously imagine and re-imagine the world. If we think of the world in terms of 'ontological flux', we can appreciate how

we 'perform a world into being' and how we 'may even speak the world into occurring' (Hastrup 2007, 198–9). In terms of worldmaking, we can see that '[i]magination and agency are two sides of the same coin', since it is only through imagination that we can grasp a social whole, be it the world, society or community, and act upon it in a meaningful way (Hastrup 2007, 202).

Literature provides a privileged venue for worldmaking, since it fixes the ontological flux through entextualization, thus offering a more stable form of collaborative improvisation (Barber 2007). Noting that the word text originates in the Latin *texere*, which means to weave, to join together, Barber argues that text has to do with 'weaving or fabricating with words' (Barber 2016, 1). She looks at texts as social facts as well as commentaries on social facts, emphasizing the reflexive dimension of text in relation to social reality (Barber 2016, 4).

If we rethink world literature in terms of a pluriverse of aesthetic worlds, we can open up new ways of capturing the existential value of literary worldmaking. Following Thiong'o, in order to 'release the worldliness' in literature, we should 'read literature, any literature, through a globalectic vision' (Thiong'o 2014, 60). Globalectics demands openness to different ways of worldmaking, without hierarchical ordering, as poetically expressed by Thiong'o: 'It is to read a text with the eyes of the world; it is to see the world with the eyes of the text' (2014, 60). The lens of creolized aesthetics can hopefully help us read the texts of Nigerian women writers with the eyes of the pluriverse and see the world of many worlds with the eyes of their texts.

2. Feminist Controversies in Maiduguri

Military escort, new moon and endless sky

A military police officer sat next to the bus driver and an open van with two armed military police drove in front of us, escorting us from the airport to the University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID) campus. At the airport there were several Westerners, wearing vests with logos of the World Food Program and United Nations Humanitarian Air Services. An immigration officer approached us when we waited for our luggage, insisting that I deliver my documents in their office. After seeing my passport, with the visa and entry stamp from Lagos, they filled in my details in a large register. 'Please make sure to pass here when you leave,' they insisted. What first came across as unnecessary hassle (my international arrival had been in Lagos, not Maiduguri) was actually a good security measure, I soon realized. If anything happened, at least the authorities would know that I had arrived in town. As we left the airport, we had to pass a gate that was secured with road obstacles that the bus had to zigzag through.

As we drove through the streets of Maiduguri, I marvelled at the greenery. The State House in particular was surrounded by lush forest, in a contrast to the flat arid landscape I had observed from the plane. The streets were lined with stylish streetlamps in iron; on campus the streetlights were solar-powered. There were some military around, and almost every wall we passed had barbed wire on top. Maiduguri was fortified. But who was the enemy? It soon became clear that it was not just Boko Haram that was creating trouble.

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'NGOs are taking over this place,' Razinat lamented in the bus. 'They are occupying most hotel rooms and hiking up prices, especially rentals, distorting our economy.' It turned out that the campus guesthouse did not have enough rooms for us, despite her advance booking. Local administrators had simply taken over some rooms for guests for an event in town. But it was the NGOs that upset Razinat. Tope and I were driven to a nearby hotel that would have rooms, but after a while it turned out that all rooms were full. 'See, it is the NGOs, they just take over everything,' Razinat said as we sat in the reception, watching some young Westerners check in. There was a summit dealing with the situation in the region, I was told, thus many guests. The situation reminded me of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 1994, when I was doing fieldwork for my master's thesis on social memory among Khmer peasants, documenting how they remembered the Pol Pot regime. At the time, Phnom Penh was a destitute city, with a large presence of NGOs, running various pet projects to 'help' rebuild post-conflict Cambodia. The contrast between NGOs and the local population was marked, in socio-economic and not to mention cultural terms. NGO workers enjoyed the comfort of villas, their everyday contacts with locals often limited to their house maids, drivers and office staff.

'My colleagues got worried when they learned that a foreigner was going to stay on campus, one of those people who wear shorts and run around all over the place,' Razinat had confessed in the bus. She was quite relieved when I showed up in a loose ankle-length black skirt, a long-sleeved blouse and my hair neatly tied back, well within the parameters of socially acceptable attire.

The insurgency in northern Nigeria had been going on for seven years. In Western media Boko Haram was featured as violent terrorists who captured women for forced marriages. But I realized that I knew very little about the conflict, its root causes and the impact it had on people living in this area, a remote part of Nigeria that was so far away from the rest of the country, let alone its distance from Western metropolises. The media narrative sounded a bit too simple, too much of a single story, to borrow Adichie's words.

In the end, Tope and I were given rooms in the UNIMAID commercial guesthouse, along with the men in the team. We were housed in spacious rooms in cottages, while the men got smaller rooms in the back. I appreciated the privileges awarded to us ladies. The room was built and decorated with visible ambition: heavy curtains in the windows on decorative curtain rods and a large carpet on the floor. The spacious bathroom had a shower that did not work, but I could use the bucket on the floor and scoop out water for my bath. There were no towels, but my wrapper from Tanzania worked just as well, doubling as a sheet at night.

The campus was quiet and peaceful, with lush gardens. The sky was clear with bright stars and the sliver of a new moon. I was imagining how magic the night must be in the nearby desert, vast plains under an endless sky.

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Maiduguri had beckoned me, enticed me to travel to Nigeria and experience the country first hand. It was Maiduguri in particular that had fuelled my fears as well as strengthened my resolve to overcome my prejudices. When I googled Maiduguri before my departure, I mostly found images of conflict and armed struggle. I knew that it was a partial picture, and I wanted to at least get a glimpse of what was omitted in media reporting. After all, people lived in Maiduguri, presumably in the pursuit of happiness just like anywhere else in the world, and armed conflicts were always complex, Boko Haram being no exception.

Razinat had become a sister even before we met, welcoming me with warm and spirited emails. Wale had connected us by email on 23 November, confirming that I would present my paper in Maiduguri:

> I have copied the mail to Dr Razinat Mohammed the Chairman of the Local Organizing Committee in Maiduguri. She is also one of our well known female writers whom you will be interviewing in Maiduguri. Razinat, Paula is a Senior Lecturer (like you) from the Stockholm University in Sweden. She will reach you shortly regarding her research interests.

I followed up by briefly introducing my research and attaching my paper. Razinat promptly replied:

> I hope this message meets you well. Thank you for your mail. I read through with peaked interest because you could not be coming at a better time and place. You will meet with not just my humble self but with Prof Zaynab Alkali, the foremost female writer from the North. Looking forward to seeing you next week. Welcome to Nigeria and indeed, Maiduguri.

Over the next few days, we exchanged several emails and Razinat's friendly tone made me feel ever so welcome. As I waited for my visa at the Nigerian Embassy in Stockholm, I googled her name and found an impressive record of scholarly and literary publications. Before my departure, she kindly advised me: 'Please, come with summer wears as the temperature may be a little warm for you even though, in actual fact, it is cooling down for us. Do take care of yourself and safe journey.' When we finally met in person at the airport in Maiduguri, we hugged each other warmly. Razinat was visibly excited about our arrival and as the chair of the local organizing committee she attended to every detail.

At the time of my visit, UNIMAID had never been attacked, something that our hosts emphasized with great pride. They made jokes about Boko Haram in the bus, undoubtedly to make us feel at ease, creating a distance between our being there and the media images we carried with us. A few of us wanted to visit a camp for internally displaced people, but we were told that it would require authorization from higher up. Our security was of utmost concern. In addition, the faculty discouraged the camps from becoming some kind of tourist trap. One of the writers arranged a visit to a camp after the event, since she was researching for a book.

In January 2017, UNIMAID was attacked by Boko Haram for the first time, followed by several attacks by suicide bombers, some of them female. Seeing that *boko haram* means 'Western education is a sin' in Hausa, it was perhaps not surprising that the university was targeted. UNIMAID's location on the outskirts of town, not far from the Sambisa Forest that has provided a sanctuary for Boko Haram, and the size of the campus made security quite porous.

UNIMAID was almost the size of a small town, I noted when taken on a tour around campus. The university was spread out on a huge tract of land, much of it uninhabited. The entrances were well guarded, with large concrete boulders making sure no unauthorized vehicles could pass. But, with several kilometres of border, it was clearly impossible to keep the place secure. I was also surprised that Boko Haram had not attacked the university previously, seeing that it was a symbol of Western education. But, shortly after our visit, the attacks unfortunately began.

Efuru@50 and African womanhood

'Some people always think we don't matter here in the north, but when given a chance we show them that we can do events just as well, if not better,' Razinat responded when I remarked how well-organized and well attended the Maiduguri event was, far surpassing what Lagos had delivered. 'The warmth was incredible,' Flora Nwapa's daughter Ejine reflected. Indeed, Efuru@50 in Maiduguri was a great success, with UNIMAID going out of its way in hosting the event. The warm hospitality of the north, coupled with the personal connections of the family, made for an impressive event, concluded with spectacular cultural performances. The spacious hall was beautifully decorated with rows of metal framed chairs with blue and red cushions, large sofas at the front row for VIPs, long blue curtains covering the windows, and a large stage framed by stone-like tiles. The sound system worked exquisitely well and the A/C units and fans ensured a pleasant temperature throughout the day. The audience was numerous from the outset, reaching over 500 in total, mostly students but also many faculty members. The programme started a bit late, but great efforts were made to keep time.

The programme started with elaborate welcoming remarks, led by none less than the vice-chancellor, followed by the keynote speaker, Professor Zaynab Alkali, introduced by Razinat. Razinat welcomed and thanked the dignitaries as well as the audience, adding, 'I stand on existing protocol.' This elaborate ritual was repeated by all speakers, often referring to existing protocol, thus positioning the speaker in the event's social hierarchy. Razinat then elucidated the cultural significance of the event: a

Figure 4. Audience at University of Maiduguri. Photograph by author.

dual celebration of womanhood and Flora Nwapa. When she mentioned the presence of Flora Nwapa's biological children, the audience applauded.

Razinat underlined how Flora Nwapa, whose name was already immortalized through her writings, was now being immortalized by the event: 'As great writers like Shakespeare had said in their times, "when you write, you immortalize your name", and, although today it is *Efuru* we are celebrating, for reaching the golden jubilee of 50 years, we are also celebrating the writer.'

The notion of writers immortalizing their name through their writing offers an insightful example of the expansion of intersubjective spacetime through fame. As Munn ascertains, fame is a mobile, circulating dimension of a person, as a name travels apart from his/her physical presence (Munn 1986, 105). Literary fame is particularly poignant, since fame is a 'virtual form of influence' that works 'at the level of discourse by significant others' (Munn 1986, 117). In the case of writers, it is not only their names that circulate in the minds of distant others but also their written words, thus making them 'available in other times and places'. At

Efuru@50, Flora Nwapa's name travelled widely, decades after her own passing on, thus expanding the intersubjective spacetime of her person.

Razinat proceeded excitedly: 'I have the singular honour to introduce our *first*; just like Flora Nwapa is the *first* female writer in the whole of Africa, Zaynab Alkali is our own *first* northern Nigeria female writer!' With a big smile on her face, Razinat put her hands together and the audience joined her in a warm, welcoming applause.

Professor Zaynab Alkali walked up to the stage, where she gracefully greeted the audience. She positioned herself behind the shiny white podium, with a microphone bent to her size. Dressed in a grey-and-black striped gown with matching headscarf, her golden-framed glasses matching her gold rings and bracelets, Zaynab Alkali embodied subtle beauty. Having personally known Flora Nwapa since 1989, when she was offered a visiting professorship at UNIMAID, Zaynab Alkali combined thoughtful analysis of Efuru with personal anecdotes of their time together. In her keynote, entitled 'Nwapa's Efuru: The Bridge Builder and Defender of the Values of African Womanhood' (Alkali 2016, 3), she elaborated:

> Today we celebrate not only Flora Nwapa the author and *Efuru* the book, but we celebrate an occasion larger than the two. Efuru is not just a novel, and a character in a novel; *Efuru* stands for the values of African womanhood. The African woman, who was here at the beginning of times, here today and shall be here tomorrow.
>
> Nwapa created a timeless African Woman whose values transcend time. In Efuru we see ourselves, our mothers and several generations of mothers before us. In Efuru we see our daughters and generations of daughters after us. The creation of the woman Efuru is immortal, and the message for women defies time. I see the author as a bridge builder and a defender of the values of African womanhood.

Zaynab Alkali expanded Flora Nwapa's fame even further, accrediting her for creating a timeless African woman, thereby extending her virtual influence to African femininity. In ascertaining that the 'creation of the woman Efuru is immortal', Zaynab Alkali

performed the role of an external source who reflected the writer's influential acts back to herself (Munn 1986, 117). Emphasizing that Efuru was not just a character in a novel but a representation of the values of African womanhood, she used a cultural model of framing that portrayed a fictitious character as a reference point for everyday experience (Turner 1987, 140). In praising a woman for the creation of a woman who represented the timeless values of African womanhood, Zaynab Alkali's reflections underscored the encompassing frame of femininity, while her appeals to their timeless immortality underlined the spirituality of this sacred drama.

Having emphasized African womanhood, immortalized in *Efuru*, Zaynab Alkali proceeded with challenging radical feminism, noting how critics had readily branded Nwapa as a pioneer radical feminist in African women's writing, although Nwapa herself refused the label. Quoting an interview with Flora Nwapa in a text by Marie Umeh (1995), Zaynab Alkali pointed out what Nwapa had said when asked about feminism: 'I don't think that I am radical feminist. I don't even accept that I am a feminist. I accept that I'm an ordinary woman who is writing about what she knows.' She added, 'I hasten to agree with the author' (Alkali 2016, 5). Zaynab Alkali then shared stories of radical feminists she and Flora Nwapa had encountered in Europe, women who looked like and behaved like men, women who even married other women. They had travelled together to the Fifth Feminist Book Fair in Amsterdam 1991, where Zaynab Alkali had her 'first shocking encounter' with radical feminists. The agitated and wildly gesticulating man seated near her turned out to be a woman. Her second culture shock was in response to how the audience booed and screamed at the lady minister's remark that the fair was not 'an avenue to propagate unwholesome ideologies like same-sex marriages' but an event for 'respectable and responsible, decent looking women'. Some 'manly looking women' even advanced toward the podium, Alkali recollected, demanding a public apology. 'Aunty Flora was later to explain to me that many women at the fair were either married to women, or living together. "Only few of us here are married to men," and indeed she was quickly proved right' (Alkali 2016, 9).

Alkali underlined *complementarity* in Flora Nwapa's work, emphasizing that men were never excluded and that women's fulfilment was closely linked to that of men, concluding:

> The author advocates and seeks for the African Woman the importance of being guided right, of complementary in relationships, not only in marriage but in the family unit. What Nwapa seeks especially for the educated woman is what Efuru embodies: respect honour, decorum and dignity, attributes that modernity seeks to erode in today's women. (Alkali 2016, 11–12)

It was not easy to present my paper on cosmopolitan feminism after the keynote. Luckily there was an interlude after Alkali's presentation, a short drama performance. 'You will present your paper when the performance is finished,' one of the organizers told me. The slight change in programming suited me just fine, but, knowing that the organizers were showing off their excellent time management skills, I had to improvise, making sure I would say what needed to be said in the short time span of 15 minutes, without the benefit of a projector (which could have been arranged, the organizers assured me, but it was not requested in advance). I walked up the tiled steps to the stage with great care, making sure I did not stumble on my long dress or drop the laptop I carried. The small podium was large enough for my laptop, with two microphones amplifying my voice. I had bought a new dress for the occasion, a flattering foot-length gown that was very comfortable. The dress gave me confidence.

I opened my PowerPoint presentation and picked some highlights from my paper, while relating to what the keynote had said. I made sure to articulate how privileged I felt to be part of such a great occasion, while confessing how intimidating it felt to be on stage. In front of me were rows of stern-looking middle-aged men, who did not at all seemed convinced by what I said, and behind them rows of young students who perhaps had a more positive response. But I learned that, in this cultural context, quietly listening to the presenter was the order of the day, not interaction or interruption, making it difficult to gauge the audience's response.

It was only afterwards that I realized how significant my presence (and possibly talk) had been, as students flocked to have

their photograph taken with me on their mobile phones. They took pictures in groups and individually, sometimes as selfies. I was astonished to see that some of the female students posed according to the social media trend of the duck face, with pouting mouth and angle from above. Students in Maiduguri were clearly in tune with global trends. Being the only foreigner (and the only white person) awarded me an elevated status, a symbol of metropolitan power, which I was not altogether comfortable with. But I tried to live up to expectations, smiling and posing with the students. A young lady suddenly appeared with a microphone in her hand, from University of Maiduguri Radio. She wanted to interview me and I gladly complied. She asked what I thought of the event, what was important about women writers, and what I thought of feminism. 'Yes, I am a feminist,' I responded with confidence, when she asked, adding, 'I think everyone should be.'

After tea break, during which local snacks were served, the programme continued with paper presentations by leading Nigerian female academics and a quiz for students. The papers were well prepared and expertly delivered, highlighting various aspects of *Efuru*, in the context of literary production in Nigeria. The student competition was a delight: pairs of students from six competing secondary schools and colleges sat on chairs on the stage, confidently responding to the questions posed. They had memorized an impressive amount of detail from *Efuru*: names, relationships and events, along with a solid understanding of the plot. The UNIMAID school team had loud supporters cheering them on. The score turned out to be even: two teams shared first place and four shared second place. Prizes were stored in a *Ghana Must Go* bag, a large zipped carrying bag that got its name from the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in the 1980s.[11] Unfortunately, the name had stuck. The prizes of books were ceremoniously awarded by senior faculty and members of Flora Nwapa's family.

The programme ended with prayers, thus affirming the encompassing cultural frame of spirituality. Unlike the Christian dominance of other events, in Maiduguri prayers catered to Muslims

[11] The name for the bag should not be confused with Selasie's debut novel *Ghana Must Go* (Selasie 2013).

as well as Christians. The Muslim prayer was delivered in Arabic, the Christian one in English, both invoking God as a witness to the event.

Flora Nwapa's eldest daughter, Ejine, concluded the event with a heartfelt thank you. She spoke with a confident voice, her warm words overflowing with deep gratitude, while reminiscing about her mother's connection to Maiduguri. Her brother and sister walked near the stage and took pictures of her with their mobile phones, as she continued her remarks.

> We were also particularly glad, my brother, sister and I that we were able to meet people we had not been connected with in a very long time. Back in 1989, our mother introduced us to a new auntie, an auntie from the north of Nigeria, Auntie Zaynab Alkali. And so seeing her today, after such a long time, was such a delight for us. And we say thank you again that it was because you invited us that we were able to see her.
>
> Our mother's stay in Maiduguri was an important turn in her life. She was very serious about it. In those days there were no direct flights to Maiduguri, but she would come all the way from Enugu to this place because it meant so much to her. And it is therefore easy for us to say, because we know that the time she spent in Maiduguri were some of the most peaceful times in her life. [applause]
>
> Today we celebrate Efuru and a lot of people just know the word Efuru. Efuru is an Igbo name and the full name is *Nwa ane funi efuni* [applause]; it means the child that everybody loves, the child that everybody is obsessed about.
>
> But for us, her children, and seeing Professor Zaynab Alkali after such a long time, we also want to give you an Oguta word. And that Oguta word, I'll say it in Oguta and I'll translate, it says *nwanyibuife*. It means *woman is something*. And so, ladies and gentlemen, we thank you for being here to honour Flora Nwapa, as pure in her own personality and her own person. But for us, a mother that we did not realize was so famous. Thank you very much. [loud applause]

In the evening, we were treated to spectacular cultural performances and a sumptuous dinner, true to the warm hospitality of northern Nigeria. Everyone had dressed up for the evening, ladies in beautiful embroidered and glittery gowns, men in colourful printed shirts or long robes.

A master drummer beat the rhythm for the dancers, creating magic with his four drums, while directing the younger drummers next to him. He was announced to be one of the best drummers in the country, and I had no doubt he was.

The dancers were dressed in beautiful costumes, elegantly moving to the rhythm of the music, the male dancers using their long robes in black and purple to create visual effects, as shown in the film *Efuru@50*. The first was a romantic dance from northern Nigeria, often performed at weddings. It was danced in pairs of men and women and in the end the men lay down, resting their heads on their female partners' laps, a very intimate pose. 'I danced this at a friend's wedding,' Salamatu whispered to me. The music and dance evoked sounds and images of the arid plains and desert, a region unknown to many of us, with its own mystique.

Nwapa's *Women Are Different*, feminism and womanism

Zaynab Alkali's keynote captured some of the controversies of feminism in African literary contexts. As noted in the paper I presented in Maiduguri (Uimonen 2016), feminism has often been attacked as a Western ideology, typically portrayed as 'anti-male, anti-culture and anti-religion' (Nkealah 2006, 134). Alkali's portrayal of radical feminists in Europe illustrated how feminists have often been equated with 'aggressive women who try to be like men, dress carelessly and abandon essential feminine attributes' (Adimora-Ezeigbo, cited in Arndt 2002, 27). Overall, the negative stereotypification of feminism has included: hatred of men, rejection of African traditions, denunciation of marriage as well as motherhood, and promotion of lesbian love (Arndt 2002, 27). By contrast, scholars have suggested African feminism to be 'distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal and concerned with many "bread, butter, culture, and power" issues' (Mikell 1997, 4). Reflecting their ambivalence about feminism, African women have crafted a plethora of alternatives, such as womanism, Africana womanism, stivanism, motherism and negofeminism (Arndt 2002, 59). Some of these alternatives have been conceptualized by members of the African diaspora, often African-Americans, but, while movements like black feminism may come across as cross-cultural, they are not necessarily welcomed in African contexts (Arndt 2002, 61–3). Instead,

African women have insisted on cultural self-representation (Oyěwùmi 2003). When it comes to gender relationships, there has been an emphasis on the complementarity of men and women, as exemplified by Alkali's keynote.

In literary studies, feminism has been particularly problematic, since many feminist scholars categorize all works by women writers as feminist, regardless of the author's own standpoint. Most women writers I have interviewed identify with feminism and/or womanism, but they insist on (re)defining feminism in a way that is compatible with their own values. In an interview in 2009, Razinat Mohammed referred to feminism as 'a large masquerade that provides cover for many bad dancers', because:

> many so-called critics hide under the cover of feminism and all they seem to be doing is classifying every work written by a woman as feminist work. It is really getting out of hand. I think that there are other parts to the lives of women (even in African Literature) other than woman fighting to get free of man's holds.[12]

Similarly, Obioma Nnaemeka has highlighted the 'blatant distortions of the works of African women writers by feminist critics in the name of "feminist criticism"' (1995, 81).

These ambivalences about feminism point to challenges when addressing gender in world literature. Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of making African women's invisible literary histories more visible, critiquing their canonical marginalization and bringing forth their voices (e.g. Arndt 2002; Stratton 1994; Sutherland-Addy and Diaw 2005). In some cases, this scholarship has superimposed Western feminist theory on African women's literature, which has been rebutted by African feminist scholars (e.g. Nkealah 2006; Nnaemeka 1995, 1997; Ogunyemi 1996), thus highlighting the challenges of feminism in relation to African literature. Female scholars have also discussed gender in African literature from the perspective of women writers, paying closer attention to their cultural contexts (e.g. James 1990;

[12] 'The Challenges of Being a Writer – Razinat (Interview)', published on 7 March 2009 in *New Nigerian* newspaper, posted online on 2 June 2009, http://everythinliterature.blogspot.com/2009/06/challenges-of-being-writer-razinat.html, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

Newell [1997] 2017; Makuchi 1997; Ogunyemi 1996; Salami-Boukari 2012), some using vernacular gender theories to bring forth a more culturally anchored understanding of gender relations (e.g. Makuchi 1997; Ogunyemi 1996). The sheer diversity of this gender focused scholarship illustrates the limitations of dominant world literature theory, which tends to ignore gender altogether (Bergenmar and Leppänen 2017; Castillo 2012; Higonnet 2009). But it also shows that greater attention to gender requires more critical theory, beyond feminist theory.

While Alkali quoted Flora Nwapa for refusing to be labelled a feminist, she has actually been cited for both rejecting the term as well as espousing it. When interviewed by Alison Perry in 1984, Flora Nwapa was quoted as saying: 'Just because I write about women, people accuse me of being feminist!', a remark she was described as having expressed 'somewhat indignantly', and it was clarified that 'Ms. Nwapa dislikes the term because it implies division between men and women', and preferred the term 'womanist' (Perry 1984, 1262). In the interview cited by Alkali, Flora Nwapa was asked by Marie Umeh: 'The critic Katherine Frank, in an article entitled "Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa," describes you as a radical feminist. What is your opinion of this assessment?' to which Flora Nwapa answered, 'I don't think that I'm a radical feminist. I don't even accept that I'm a feminist' (Umeh 1995, 27). Similarly to Perry, Umeh underlined that Flora Nwapa 'preferred to be identified with Alice Walker's term "womanist"' (Umeh 1995, 22). This was in December 1992, in Marie Umeh's last conversation with Flora Nwapa. Even so, a few months earlier, at an international conference on 'Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and the Academy', held in Nsukka, Nigeria, in July 1992, where Ama Ata Aidoo delivered a keynote, Flora Nwapa had said:

> Having heard Obioma [Nnaemeka] on Monday, having heard Ama [Ata Aidoo] today, I think that I will go all out and say that I am a feminist with a big 'f' because Obioma said on Monday that feminism is about possibilities: there are possibilities, there are choices. Let us not be afraid to say that we are feminists. We need one another, we really need one another. Globally, we need one another. (Flora Nwapa, cited in Nnaemeka 1995, 83)

Nnaemeka has noted that, while Nwapa has been criticized for her 'inconsistency' on feminism, 'what is inconsistent is the location (physical and ideological) from where she is hounded for an answer' (Nnaemeka 1995, 84). Nwapa refused to be labelled as a feminist when the term was used in ways that differed from her culturally situated perspective, but '[i]f the way we frame feminism corresponds to "what she knows," she would definitely claim feminism.'

Flora Nwapa's ambivalence about feminism and identification with womanism can be appreciated in relation to her situatedness as an African woman writer. In an interview in 1985, Flora Nwapa was asked if she was concerned about the fate of the black woman and responded affirmatively, underlining that 'the black woman, whether she is in Africa, North America or the Caribbean. She faces many problems. I think the crux of these problems is economic' (Flora Nwapa, cited in James 1990, 112). While she thought that the notion of being a black woman was not a 'double ill-fate' in America and Europe, she found that 'in Nigeria that statement is relevant', since women were oppressed at home and at work: 'Your husband oppresses you, your employer oppresses you and then your society piles upon you double, if not treble suffering' (Nwapa, cited in James 1990, 114). While reflecting on her professional situation as an African writer in terms of 'the reality of being an under-dog', she noted that, '[s]piritually, it does not affect my work, but physically the question of getting the tools that I need to my work affects me.' While clarifying that the 'problems we face in Nigeria are not unique to us, they are problems of nation-building', she also appreciated the challenges of underdevelopment in more than material terms: 'Development is not merely in the physical structures, it is mental' (Nwapa, cited in James 1990, 113). Reflecting on the development of her own civilization, she underlined how 'In certain areas it was developed', as exemplified by kingships in Yoruba culture and parts of Igboland, yet colonialism created a serious rupture: 'It is the problem of the "Oyinbo" [Western civilization] that has overwhelmed us' (Nwapa, cited in James 1990, 113). Noting that she was a 'very strong woman', when James asked where she derived her strength from, Flora Nwapa responded, 'Maybe

from God who gave me the physical strength and the opportunities that I have had', as well as 'From my stars, for making me a Capricorn', while also acknowledging her parents, who brought her up 'in the best traditions' (Nwapa, cited in James 1990, 116).

Reflecting on her own everyday experiences, Flora Nwapa pinpointed how oppression of women can be traced to the domestic setting of family life:

> The oppression of women starts in the home. In our homes today, we treat girls differently, and we treat boys as if they are kings. I remember the problem I have in my own home when I make my only son go to the kitchen and cook, wash the plates and so on. He does it. But then my mother-in-law comes in and says in a raised voice, 'Why are you allowing this boy to do this, he is a man, he is not supposed to be in the kitchen.' That is where the trouble stems from, the double standard we use in bringing up our children. There was another encounter that I was very happy about because my son was then only about five years old. Grandmother told him that he was not supposed to be in the kitchen. Then he replied, 'Grandmother, but Amos is our cook and Amos is a man.' If you can educate a boy at an early age he will grow up to appreciate women, and to appreciate his wife. You see this is very very important. A woman who says she is oppressed and then has a son and treats him like a king, such a woman is perpetuating the problems we are complaining about. (Nwapa, cited in James 1990, 113–14)

Flora Nwapa's preoccupation with different forms of oppression can be related to womanist concerns. As an African woman, she identified with black women around the world, thus emulating Alice Walker's womanism, with its focus on women of colour. But womanism is not only concerned with gender or race; it is a 'social change perspective' that is 'rooted in Black women's and other women of colour's everyday experiences', yet 'extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension' (Phillips 2006, xx). This holistic appraisal of human existence is evident in Nwapa's reflections cited above, from her concern with structural oppression and global inequality to her endorsement of God and spiritual power. While her preoccupation with gender equality overlaps with feminism, her situated perspective is that of an

African womanist; who confronts the 'multifarious, third-world challenges', from the position of 'African women's inclusive, mother-centered ideology, with its focus on caring' (Ogunyemi 1996, 114–16). In Flora Nwapa's case, caring for her family was inseparable from her womanist appraisal of how to overcome oppression, as exemplified in her account of raising children, especially her male child, as cited above.[13]

The ways in which Nwapa addressed women and social transformation in marital relationships is illustrative of her womanist perspective, as exemplified by the novel *Women Are Different* (Nwapa [1986] 1992). The title captures how women are different from men, but also how women are different from one another. In the novel, the life stories of a group of women are interwoven with societal transformations, from their schooldays in late colonial times to adulthood in post-independent Nigeria. As the women chart out their lives, they navigate various aspects of modern life, from career and financial independence to marriage and relationships with men. Nwapa's womanist ambition is spelled out when one of the heroines divorces her husband to live her life independently, socially and financially:

> Chinwe had done the right thing. Her generation was doing better than her mother's own. Her generation was telling the men, that there are different ways of living one's life fully and fruitfully. They are saying that women have options. Their lives cannot be ruined because of a bad marriage. They have a choice, a choice to set up a business of their own, a choice to marry and have children, a choice to marry or divorce their husbands. Marriage is NOT the only way. (Nwapa 1992, 118–19)

Through literary portrayals of marriage, Flora Nwapa could address the politics of domestic life, while voicing critique against social institutions that hampered gender equality, such as polygamy. While recognizing that traditional Igbo society regarded gender relations as 'complementary and balanced', rather than 'conflictual or competing', Akachi Ezeigbo has discussed how

[13] Many years later, Adichie made a similar point in *We Should All Be Feminists*: 'And this is how to start: we must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently' (Adichie 2014, 25).

Flora Nwapa addressed 'gender conflict' in her novels ([1997] 2017, 95). She underlines that 'the majority of modern Nigerian women reject the institution of polygyny', which she describes as an 'instrument of oppression wielded by men to subjugate and dominate women', a marital arrangement that 'introduces conflict into the home and encourages rivalry among co-wives' (Ezeigbo 2017, 100–101). The subject is often brought forward in literary portrayals of polygyny, as exemplified by Chinwe moving out when her husband brings in a younger, second wife in Nwapa's *Women Are Different* (Ezeigbo 2017, 100). As described below, Razinat Mohammed's novel *The Travails of a First Wife* (2015) also addressed the tensions and ordeals of polygamy. Ezeigbo has noted that '[d]uring a writing career spanning nearly thirty years of Nigeria's history, Nwapa maintained a consistent attitude towards polygynous men', depicting how 'conflicts engulf polygynous marriages' (Ezeigbo 2017, 101). In her first novel, Efuru accepted her husband taking another wife, to show that she was not selfish. But in her second novel, *Idu*, Nwapa showed that 'successful marriages are possible' when they are 'founded on love, mutual respect, trust and moral probity' (Ezeigbo 2017, 102). While Efuru turned to the Woman of the Lake after disappointing marriages, the story of Idu ended on a very different note, as she followed her husband to death: 'Come, let's prepare for the funeral, don't you see she is dead? She kept her word. She has followed her husband to the land of the dead. Come let's prepare her properly for the journey' (Nwapa 1970, 218).

Flora Nwapa had personal experience of some of the contradictions and paradoxes she wrote about, not least the tensions of a polygamous marriage. Flora Nwapa was the first wife of industrialist Gogo Nwakuche, yet, rather than divorce him when he married his second and third wives, she remained for the sake of their two children, as she reflected in the documentary film *Forfatterinne idag: Flora Nwapa* (NRK TV 1987, 34:29–37:07):

> No woman wants to be in a polygamous family, if she can help it. If a woman tells you that it is alright by her, she is not telling you the truth. […] I think the men are enjoying the situation. I think they are, because if they are not, they would have tried to do something about it. I was telling you the other day in Enugu that my own husband has three wives [raises three fingers to illustrate]. Me and two others. I am the first one. [Interviewer: How do you

> feel about it?] I don't feel good about it. At first I couldn't take it. But I thought to myself, I said 'I have a son, I have a daughter. If I go, these children are going to suffer. They would not have my motherly care.' [Why not?] Because I would have to leave the home, and the children would stay with their father. Let's not talk about taking the man to court, your husband to court. I don't think any woman has done that with success. One thing, if you say you are taking your husband to court, because he committed bigamy, Nigerian society will laugh at you. They'll say 'Who is going to be the judge, who is going to be your lawyer, who hasn't also committed bigamy?'

Writing at the crossroads of cultural change, Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worldmaking captured the multifaceted ambivalences of social life. Similarly to other African women writers, her female characters were 'victims of multiple oppressions that are internally generated by oppressive customs and practices and externally induced by an equally oppressive, inegalitarian world order' (Nnaemeka 1997, 21). Since she identified as a womanist, Flora Nwapa's literary work conveyed the ambition to 'criticize grossly unfair gender arrangements', which partially 'coincides with the feminist agenda', yet it was rooted in 'Nigerian cultural history,' which from a womanist perspective forms the basis of a 'modern political theory and praxis' with ideological groundings 'centered on collaboration and complementarity' (Ogunyemi 1996, 117). Flora Nwapa addressed social transformations without superimposing Western gender models on the social worlds she wrote about. By depicting women in different roles, not least in relation to marriage, motherhood and professional careers, Flora Nwapa thus offered 'role-models to her readership' through her literary heroines. (Ezeigbo [1997] 2017, 101)

Razinat Mohammed and women in the north

I interviewed Razinat in the morning after the event, in the garden of the UNIMAID guesthouse where I was staying. Busy teaching creative writing at UNIMAID, Razinat had lectured early in the morning at 7 am, but still managed to meet with me just after 9 am. We pulled some chairs under the trees in the open yard to create a shady spot. Razinat brought me three of her books as gifts: *The Travails of a First Wife* (Mohammed 2015), *Habiba* (Mohammed

2013) and the award-winning *A Love Like a Woman's and Other Stories* (Mohammed 2006). Each was carefully signed, with heart-warming dedications to her best friend Paula. She also gave me a pair of beautiful slippers, decorated with flowers. I was overwhelmed by her generosity; she was bubbling with joy, as usual.

Dr Razinat Mohammed was born in 1966 in Maiduguri. Like most people in northern Nigeria, she is Muslim. Her father was a land surveyor and contractor, her mother was a housewife; both were late. Razinat has four children, three girls and one boy. She had been widowed 12 months earlier, she explained with a tone of sadness in her voice. Her late husband was a lecturer at UNIMAID, as food scientist in the Engineering Department. In response to my question on what languages she speaks and what her mother tongue is, Razinat reflected: 'Because I come from a polygamous family with four wives all speaking different languages, my father thought it was best we all communicated in Hausa,' and concluded, 'so if there is a mother tongue then Hausa has to be my mother tongue.' In addition to Hausa and English, the latter spoken with a pronounced northern accent, Razinat speaks Yoruba and a little bit of Kanuri. Razinat was educated in public government schools, in Maiduguri as well as at Ido-Ani, Ondo State, in Yorubaland, western Nigeria. She holds a PhD (2004) in feminist literary criticism, gender studies, from University of Maiduguri. Her PhD dissertation analysed how women oppress women in novels by Buchi Emecheta and Nawal El Saadawi.

Similarly to other women writers, Razinat started writing at an early age:

> As a secondary school student, I started scribbling poetry. But why? To answer the why question, I would say interest. Because first, when I gained admission to the university here, I was given history to read. And then I rejected history; I objected vehemently. Hmmm, at that time I wanted to read law, but, when the admission list came, they said I had to wait for a second reshuffling. Then I was given history and I didn't feel like reading history, so I protested, I complained. I wrote a letter of complaint. And then the explanation they gave me then was because I had an 'A' grade in history. Then I said 'Yes but I also have A in English. So, because I don't want to read history, let me read English.' So then I came to English. I preferred the literature, because I love reading novels.

> I started reading novels very young, at a very young age. So I am very at home, very comfortable with reading. Because sometimes I am a loner and you find companionship with reading. When you are alone and you delve into reading you don't feel alone anymore. So that is actually the pleasure and maybe that is the reason I started scribbling things and apart from the interest, of course I have interest in writing.
>
> Because in my place here we have lots of issues and we don't have many writers especially, women writers. The stories of women are not told correctly by men. And for that reason of course I needed to also start to present issues that affect women from my own point of view.

Razinat's desire to tell the stories of women resonates with Flora Nwapa's aim to give a more accurate portrayal of women, but Razinat also draws inspiration from other women writers. Her role models are: Zaynab Alkali, who she is 'close to', Nawal El Saadawi, her 'all-time favourite novelist', and Buchi Emecheta, 'another woman writer that impresses me'.

When telling the stories of women in northern Nigeria, Razinat focuses on challenging issues in what she defines as 'a typically patriarchal society':

> I write essentially about the plight of women in my society here, Borno. I write because women in the patriarchal society are often subjected to some kind of experiences that shouldn't be lived. You see we still have problems of early marriage, some parts of my region, you have 12-year old married out to 60-year old men. Yes, of course. And we have children being withdrawn from schools, girls, girl children especially, being withdrawn from schools, for purposes or reasons of being given out in marriages. We have the problem of women handling polygamy. Polygamy, although religiously permissible, women never accept the practice, the plight of women in such kind of setup, which is what my third work is about. Yes. So those are the issues that I try to look at, experiences of women in a typically patriarchal society like mine.

Polygamy is a theme that Razinat has dealt with in her novel *The Travails of a First Wife* (2015). In the novel, we can follow the ordeals of Zarah, who finds that her husband of many years suddenly marries not only one but two more wives. Far from being an equilibrious polygamous household, the relations between

the three wives remain poisoned by jealousy, suspicion and hatred. Despite her aversion to her increasingly abusive husband, Zarah decides to remain in the household. The story is told with great insight and purposefully provocative.

> If Ibrahim wanted to carry hot charcoal on his head, who was she to advise him against it? He was the man so let him play manhood. She was going to be a character in the theatricals that was about to unfold in the house, why should she shy away from playing her own roles? She felt a little ashamed that she wasted her tears on the matter when he had told her of the planned marriage. She, however, reassured herself that the news of one's husband intending to take a wife was capable of upsetting any woman but when one woman turned two, she saw no need to worry herself further, it had become a joke and she was ready for it to unravel before her eyes. (Mohammed 2015, 58–9)

Razinat writes for both women and men, hoping to encourage social change, not least the docility of women. In her own words, 'I want the men to see, to read and see the way they treat women. Then I want the women to read and see in what ways they need to change their behaviours and their docility. Because our women are very docile. So I write for both sexes.'

To Razinat, women writers can serve as *mind-changers*, thus contributing to development, a path that Flora Nwapa first pioneered:

> The woman writer, you know, the woman is the mother of the whole universe and there can be no successful society without responsible women taking their rightful positions [we shift our chairs into a shadier place since the sun is hitting us]. So, if women delve into creative writing, certainly you know that they are going to be writing about issues that affects other women, mostly. And now, if women are given this opportunity or they seize this kind of opportunity to elevate themselves in society, certainly they can be mind-changers, they can change attitudes of other women towards public employment, or self-empowerment. And, if that happens, certainly then, they can bring development into their societies.
>
> In Nigeria, Flora Nwapa, for instance, you know she really opened her own publishing company, because of the frustration that I'm sure she had from publishing houses. So with a publishing house like that she was interested in developing young talents

through children's literature. And women's writing, as I have said, would to a larger extent influence the behaviours of other women in society. Because, when we see a woman, and we are very proud that a Nigerian woman writer was actually the first woman to have been published in Africa, because the status of even just her occupying that position alone is enough to develop the mannerism and characters and talent of other women, in Nigeria and then in Africa.

When it comes to feminism, Razinat makes sure to define feminism from her own perspective, while identifying as a feminist/womanist.

Paula: Now, as you know I am theoretically interested in feminism and Pan-Africanism, so what do you think of feminism and do you identify as a feminist?

Razinat: Feminist? Well, if by the simple definition of feminism that states that anybody, whether man or woman, that is interested in seeing that the shackles and oppressive mechanisms of society that suppresses the potentials of a woman are removed, if anybody is interested in that, then that person is automatically a feminist, whether he or she accepts it or not. In that sense and respect I am a feminist. Because I enjoy to pursue the cause of women and I enjoy to pursue the cause of women that would help women rise above the subservience of society. Yes. Aah, in that respect yes I can be, I am a feminist. But you know feminism has many branches. Nawal El Saadawi has been termed revolutionary feminist. I can't tend to be a revolutionarist, because, ehh, she was a lone voice in Egypt, or is a lone voice, since she is still around. Hmm, in my place, although I don't write fiery literature as Nawal El Saadawi, I don't, maybe I can't dare. I don't know, but nothing is restricting me from doing that really. I can! If I want to, I can! But somehow I haven't.

I am a feminist/womanist. I love the cause of womanhood. I love to see that women are better empowered. You know, we have been clamouring for a 23% of women representation in government in Nigeria, even in political positions, to be voted for and so on. And as I've always said, even in my thesis, that in every society that you go, and let me say not in every society, most societies, the

> population of women exceeds that of the men. But if that is the situation, how come Africa or Nigeria has not produced a female candidate that would go and stand for election? It is only in the primaries and then they will eliminate the woman. How come? Because certainly in Nigeria we women outnumber the men, but women will not vote for women. I don't know why. I don't know why. It is a problem that needs some attention. It is a problem that really needs looking into again, that is, sociologically. I don't know if anthropologically you can look at the trends from time past to see if this is the natural behaviour of women. Why is it that we do not stand for our own gender? We pay lip services to them.
>
> Sometimes I even think that these feminist movements are fake! I think they are not sincere. Because they will preach one thing and tomorrow they turn around. If a woman comes up it is the woman that would begin to throw the pebbles at her fellow woman. Like in my area of research, you know, if you would read many of my works, many people see that I keep derailing to the same issue, I keep it. When I'm writing these works, I don't go all out with a theme in my mind to execute. At the end of the day the work turns out, when you look at it, it turns out that women are the problems that women face in the text. Which, actually, points to the reality around us, if literature really mirrors the society, it means that our society is like that! That women are really the enemies of other women. We are not sincere to ourselves. We'll say, yes, we are trying to show women empowerment, but when that woman empowerment comes, it is the same woman that will abuse it. I don't know!

Razinat's critique of the feminist movement speaks to the bigger picture of female agency. It would be inaccurate to view women as mere victims of male oppression in patriarchal society, thus ignoring their agency. But, far from constituting some kind of global sisterhood, the agency of women can be both positive and negative towards other women. As Razinat underscored, '[w]omen are really the enemies of other women'.

In her analyses of Buchi Echemeta's and Flora Nwapa's work, Razinat has emphasized how women oppress women. In the meticulously researched article 'Maternal Oppression of the

Girl-Child in Selected Novels by Buchi Echemeta' (Mohammed 2010), Razinat examines the oppressive power of mothers in relation to their daughters. Citing Flora Nwapa, she emphasizes that oppression of women starts in the home (Mohammed 2010, 466), often at the hands of mothers. In the paper she presented at Efuru@50, Razinat analysed the female deity Uhamiri (also known as the Lake Goddess) in *Efuru* as a victimizer of women, in her denial of motherhood to women like Efuru. She noted: 'Uhamiri who is aware of the importance that patriarchy attaches to procreation should have blessed her worshippers with children' (Mohammed 2016, 6). Razinat concluded that, since Uhamiri herself is barren, she is vindictive, and in patriarchal societies that hold fertility in high regard it is often women who victimize other women for their barrenness (Mohammed 2016, 8). While Razinat's analysis offers an interesting perspective on female oppression, Flora Nwapa's portrayal of Uhamiri was quite fictitious, as she used the female deity to problematize the ideals of motherhood, as will be further discussed below.

Tope Olaifa on women and violence

Tope Olaifa joined us on the plane from Abuja to Maiduguri and we sat together on the bus from the airport. Razinat was delighted to see Tope and the three of us had our picture taken in the restaurant where we stopped for lunch, which I later posted in Facebook. Tope and I bonded over lunch when she started joking about staying under a tree at night, with the stars staring at us, thus revealing her sense of humour and romantic bent. Tall and slender in a white cotton dress with embroidered sleeves, her neck and earlobes adorned with glittering costume jewellery, Tope personified feminine elegance. Despite being tired from our travel, we decided to do an interview after dinner, in the canteen UNIMAID's guesthouse, on 30 November 2016. Tope had managed to have a short rest and felt refreshed after a shower. This was my first interview in Nigeria and Tope gracefully acknowledged that she felt privileged. Experienced in qualitative research methods, Tope assumed I wanted to use a voice recorder, which I did, and kindly pointed out the interfering noise from the ceiling fan and TV set, which the manager promptly switched off. We were the only people left in the restaurant, seated on straight-backed chairs around

a glass-top table in the corner. Tope spoke with a warm voice, carefully articulating her thoughts and clearly enunciating her words. With a flair for drama, she used vivid body language each time she described a poem or short story she had written.

Dr Tope Olaifa was born in Ota, in Ogun State, in 1960, laughingly adding she was 'five days older than Nigeria'. Her ethnicity is Yoruba and her religion is Christianity. Her late father was a teacher and headmaster, and her late mother was a cook for secondary schools. Tope attended public schools throughout her schooling. She holds a PhD in peace and conflict studies from the University of Ibadan (2013), a master's in the same subject (2004) and a BA in English language (1992). Her mother tongue is Yoruba and in addition to English she aspires to speak French. Her husband is a broadcaster with a radio station. They have three children, one male and two females. The family lives in Abeokuta, Ogun State, where Tope works as senior lecturer at the Federal University of Agriculture, Department of Communication and General Studies.

Tope started writing poetry in her late teens, and later drama. She had been inspired by poetry since secondary school, not least thanks to her 'fantastic literature teacher' who encouraged her to write verse and later on by a 'very good poetry teacher' at college. She also developed an interest in drama. Her first drama manuscript (1984, unpublished) focused on corruption in the government and was staged by students. *One Cut Too Deep* (Olaifa [2000] 2015a) was her first published play. Her second published play, *Echo of the Desolate* (Olaifa [2000] 2015b), focused on street youth and child neglect. In addition to many other unpublished plays, Tope has also published some of her poetry. *The 'Keats' in Me* (Olaifa [2011] 2014) is a collection of romantic poems, inspired by 17th-century English romantic poets and adapted to African contexts. Tope has also written some short stories, but had not yet published them.

The play *One Cut Too Deep* (Olaifa [2000] 2015a) deals with traditional practices of naming, facial marking and circumcision rites for female infants. It was staged at a writers' resort at Ijoko-Ota in 1988, directed by Dr Daniel Ayo, and has been published in numerous editions since 2000. Tope was inspired to address the topic after an argument with colleagues about female circumcision

and tradition versus civilization, following which she 'got home and started writing'. A great deal of the play centres on dialogue between husband (Ladele) and wife (Deke) as his relatives put pressure on him to have their infant girl child (Bola) marked and circumcised, following customary practice (Olaifa [2000] 2015a, 10–13):

Ladele: (*Sighs*) Deke, there [is] something important that we never discussed before and even after we got married.
Deke: What is it?
Ladele: It is one of the customs in the part of the world that I come from that every first child should be marked on the face.
Deke: (*Detaching*) So…
Ladele: Bola is going to be marked…
Deke: You must be joking (*Cutting in*)
Ladele: And circumcised too.
Deke: (*Plugging her ears with her fingers*) stop saying it! (*She screams and starts to run out of the room*).
Ladele: (*He rushes after and gets hold of her*) Deke, Deke, remember you promised.
Deke: Promised what? (*Hysterical*)
Ladele: Take it easy.
Deke: No, you don't mean it (*Grinning*) you are only joking.
Ladele: (*Pulling her to bed beside him*) Deke, I know how you feel about it; I know this is shocking to you but I want you to relax.
Deke: I don't want to hear about it.
Ladele: But you must. Bola is your child and mine too. You see, we need to deliberate on this issue.
Deke: (*Sarcastic*) Okay, I am listening.
Ladele: Deke, it's been an age-long custom in the family.
Deke: Which civilization has not meddled with (*Cutting in*).
Ladele: Of course, it has Deke (*moving close to her*). In the past, every female child was circumcised and marked.
Deke: (*Grinning*) Hun hun.
Ladele: But with civilization, the custom is being relaxed.

The moral of the play is conveyed in the last scene, bringing forth the perils of tradition as well as issues of masculinity. The child is cut against the mother's will, but perishes shortly

thereafter from the unsterilized instrument used. 'That was one cut too deep,' the doctor concludes. Distraught, Deke runs away from her husband. The narrator asks whether Ladele has learned his lessons, emphasizing the point: 'A man should be man enough to man his manliness in a manly manner.' Additionally, the hazards of customary practices are pointed out: 'Tradition is like a smear of chameleon faeces, when you clean it, it does not go totally' (Olaifa 2015a, 80).

While female circumcision constitutes a form of violence against women, Tope has not hesitated to address women as perpetrators of violence. In the paper she presented at Efuru@50, 'Women Writers and Peacebuilding in Africa', Tope discussed 'the power of the female writer to harness her natural instincts to build structures of peace thereby preventing violent conflict in Africa through her writings' (Olaifa 2016, 1). Recognizing the power and potential of women in peacebuilding, Tope also dwelled on women taking an active part in conflict, from covert participation as spies and couriers to more overt participation as suicide bombers in ISIS and Boko Haram. She also brought up domestic violence, spousal violence against men, which is rarely discussed owing to the social stigma involved. She underlined that, '[a]lthough women are not expected to be docile, they are not expected to be violent, wild or deadly either', concluding that women writers had a role to play in peacebuilding: 'Essentially women's writings should aim at orientating children and youths on values which edify and can uplift their future, enhance social development and global peace' (Olaifa 2016, 10).

Tope's analysis of women as violent is comparable with Razinat's emphasis on women as oppressors, both addressing female agency. While both recognize the victimization of women, not least as daughters, they also address the power of women to oppress and violate, even harm and kill others. Both highlight the docility of women as a problem, urging women to recognize their own role in overcoming patriarchal structures of oppression, including the various ways in which women themselves perpetuate oppressive norms and practices.

Even motherhood is critically scrutinized, a pillar in African womanhood. In Tope's play *One Cut Too Deep*, it is not only Deke's husband who fails to protect and care for his wife and

daughter; even Deke's mother goes along with his relatives' customary practice, trying to convince her daughter that 'you have to conform to the values of your in-laws' and that, barbaric as the cutting may seem, she should just 'relax' since 'it is one of the bitter pills of life that you must swallow' (Olaifa [2000] 2015a, 48–9). She even points to her own cheeks, noting 'I also have the marks and your father still considered me beautiful enough to be his wife' (Olaifa 2015a, 48). By siding with her son-in-law's relatives, the mother reproduces patriarchal structures that violate women. This is yet another case of the maternal oppression that Razinat has discussed in detail based on Buchi Echemeta's work, oppressive practices ranging from preference for boys and negligence of girls' education to lack of bonds with daughters and denial of their marital happiness (Mohammed 2010). To challenge the ideals of motherhood points to a critical sense of gender awareness, even though the writers differ in their views on feminism.

'I don't know,' Tope responded when I asked if she identified as a feminist. 'I see myself as a bundle of contradictions.' Tope does not like oppression from any angle, including oppression of women, but not because she is a woman herself or feels that women are marginalized but because 'first of all I see a woman as a human being'. 'But then, whether you like it or not, each gender has its roles,' she added, 'the biological rules are there,' along with their 'social responsibilities.' Tope used pregnancy and breastfeeding as examples of biologically driven social responsibilities. 'At the same time, I do not want the woman to be oppressed, because she is a woman.' She used professional roles and hierarchies in the workplace as an example. 'So that is where I align with feminism, which on biological grounds and social responsibility grounds I do not align with.' Laughing at herself being a contradiction, which I suggested was complexity rather than contradiction, she concluded, 'that is how I view feminism,' emphasizing that, 'we must be realistic in the drive for equality, equity.'

Womanist worldmaking and literary ontology

By invoking Flora Nwapa, I wish to probe literary worldmaking by way of womanist worldmaking, to exemplify the ontological force of literature. As Hayot suggests, 'focusing on the ontology

of composed works, can bring "world" differently into the scene' (Hayot 2012, 41). When exploring literary worldmaking, we should keep in mind that aesthetic worlds are 'relations to and theories of the lived world' (Hayot 2011, 137). Literature can thus be read as 'fictionalized theory or as theorized fiction', in other words in relation to 'teleological, ontological, and epistemological insights and praxes relevant to the specific histories and politics that preceded the fictional texts' (Makuchi 1997, 20). The notion of literary worldmaking corroborates the anthropological notion that 'creativity is a profoundly *social* fact' since writers, like all humans, are '*social* to the core' (Hastrup 2007, 193, emphasis in original). Similarly, humans are *cultural*, with enormous variation in 'local models of being-in-society' (Barber 2007, 26). These cultural models are ontological; they provide conceptualizations of the world as well as scripts for social life. Through their creative agency, writers engage with these cultural models, offering 'alternative ways of seeing things and acting on them' (Hastrup 2007, 204). Since writers straddle both real and imaginary worlds, literature offers a privileged space for worldmaking, especially when it comes to exploring different notions of the real/possible in the pluriverse through relational ontologies and transition discourses (Escobar 2020).

In the case of Flora Nwapa, her aesthetic worldmaking both drew upon and departed from existing cultural models, aesthetically capturing as well as influencing social transformation by way of her womanist agenda. As anthropologist Jell-Bahlsen has pointed out, 'A novel is a work of art' and therefore 'must not be taken literally' but requires a careful reading to distinguish 'a meta-text critical of the author's own culture, as illustrated by Flora Nwapa' (2016, 7). She has affirmed that, while Flora Nwapa 'remained grounded and at home in Oguta culture and society, she was also a womanist, who featured women's issues in her writing and promoted women's rights as a writer' (Jell-Bahlsen 2016, 8). Ogunyemi recounts how early female writers like Flora Nwapa, who 'descended from generations of raconteuses', especially the tradition of women's storytelling at night, could now tell 'fictional and autobiographical stories her predecessors did not dare to voice to an unknown audience', thus using the novel for 'transforming herself into a spokeswoman' (Ogunyemi

1996, 120). For African womanists, it was important to develop 'a philosophy of life acceptable to both men and women', which Ogunyemi describes as an 'inclusionary and very African stance [that] demands strategies in reading the novels and sometimes necessitates probing on several levels to reach the subtexts' (Ogunyemi 1996, 121). She refers to the concept 'double-voiced discourse', which, similarly to Jell-Bahlsen's 'meta-text', alerts the reader to the importance of probing beyond the story as it is told.

The ways in which Flora Nwapa portrayed the Lake Goddess is an interesting example of her womanist worldmaking. In her analysis of Mammy Water myths, Jell-Bahlsen notes 'an amazing coherence between the testimonies of local informants, and the literary works of prominent members of Igbo culture: Chinua Achebe, Chinwe Achebe, Flora Nwapa' (Jell-Bahlsen 1997, 106). She discusses how 'Ogbuide features prominently in local life, as Flora Nwapa attests in her novels' (Jell-Bahlsen 1997, 121), noting how 'Flora Nwapa describes the Goddess' special importance to women' (Jell-Bahlsen 1997, 119). Similarly, Ezeigbo recounts that the 'myth of Uhamiri constitutes an important symbol in practically all Nwapa's major writing' (Ezeigbo 1998a, 54). Reflecting on her women-centred storytelling, Ezeigbo refers to Nwapa as a historical novelist, arguing that, '[a]part from her use of a mythic framework to deepen the portrayal of her major female characters, Nwapa also adopts a historical perspective in exploring female experience in her society,' her historical imagination complementing what writers like Chinua Achebe have written from a male perspective (Ezeigbo 1998a, 57).

While the close correspondence between Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worlds and Oguta cosmology attests to the relational ontology of her literary worlding, we should not lose sight of Flora Nwapa's womanist worldmaking. As Jell-Bahlsen has clarified in her comparison of artistic liberty and ethnography: 'while inspired by local Oguta beliefs and lore, Nwapa also deconstructs the myth of the goddess,' and she 're-constructs the myth of the idealized divine woman and voices her own concerns and ideals of womanhood' (Jell-Bahlsen 2007, 32). Likewise, Ezeigbo underlines how the author uses the 'resources of her imagination' to breathe life into a myth from her own culture, describing how

Nwapa 'reinvents the Uhamiri myth and claims the female deity for womanhood'; in other words, 'Nwapa modifies the myth to suit her purpose of empowering women and uplifting them' (Ezeigbo 1998a, 54–5).

A concrete example of how Nwapa diverted from local beliefs and practices is the ways in which she fictionalized the Lake Goddess to problematize motherhood. As you may recall, Razinat Mohammed discussed Uhamiri in Nwapa's *Efuru* in terms of female oppression, due to her denial of motherhood for her worshippers (Mohammed 2016). By contrast, Ogunyemi has discussed Efuru's worship of the Goddess in terms of how 'Uhamiri, as the mother dwelling within, frees Efuru from sexism and colonialism', and that the 'most important message' of the novel is that 'motherhood is not limited to the biological but extends to the social where it better serves woman, gender/politics, and community/nation' (Ogunyemi 1996, 156). While both analyses are interesting, Nwapa's portrayal of the barrenness of Uhamiri and her worshippers was completely fictitious. In actual practice, Uhamiri does not deny women children; quite the opposite, she is 'recognized as *the* mother water goddess' and known as 'our mother' in Oguta, valued as 'the one to whom we owe our lives on earth' (Jell-Bahlsen 2008, 37). Since she was fully aware of local beliefs and practices, it should become clear that 'Flora Nwapa's statements on the "childlessness" of Oguta's Lake Goddess are one example of the author's insider's critique of her own people's obsession with female fecundity' (Jell-Bahlsen 2016, 7).

In terms of cultural context, we should keep in mind that Nwapa's depictions of the Lake Goddess in her aesthetic worldmaking was far from controversial, given the religious conflicts in her own community. As you may recall, Ogunyemi listed religious fundamentalism as one of the sites of oppression that African women struggle with (Ogunyemi 1996, 114). In Oguta, Christianity has wreaked havoc with local belief systems, as detailed in Jell-Bahlsen's ethnography, and '[f]emale leadership, both secular and sacred', is 'still being assaulted by religious colonialism' (Jell-Bahlsen 2008, 25). Over the years, this onslaught has if anything gotten worse, as fanatic 'church people' have destroyed shrines and sculptures for water deities, while overzealous Christians

have targeted female priestesses in particular (Jell-Bahlsen 2011, 203; see also Jell-Bahlsen 2016). The tragic fate of the priestess Eze Mmiri, Madame Martha Mberekpe, shows how even step-children have turned against their mother, in this case Roman Catholics joining hands with charismatic Christians in a brutal assault: beating the priestess, destroying her shrine, chasing her from her home, and making her convert to Christianity, shortly after which she tragically died (Jell-Bahlsen 2011). But assaults by Christian fanatics have not always been successful, while the effects of such sacrilegious acts have sometimes backfired. Flora Nwapa's son, Uzoma Nwakuche, recounts how a born-again Christian tried to burn down the Akpatakuma shrine in his village Umunsoha in Oguta around 2009/2010, but was stopped by villagers who protected the shrine, and, interestingly enough, the man who tried to destroy the shrine died less than six months later (Uzoma Nwakuche, pers. comm., 3 June 2020).[14]

Despite such religious conflicts, Flora Nwapa narrated the worldviews of the Lake People, and the interconnectedness of their natural and spiritual worlds. As much as she was brought up as a Christian with modern education, Nwapa kept her Oguta community close to her heart. Jell-Bahlsen has described how 'Flora Nwapa struggled with certain aspects of local custom in her earlier novels' but, 'towards the end of her life, Nwapa clearly acknowledged her people's beliefs in their heartfelt indebtness to their mother water goddess' (Jell-Bahlsen 2008, 37). Through her fiction, Flora Nwapa conveyed how the lives of Oguta people are intertwined with the lake and its Goddess. In *The Lake Goddess*, Nwapa made explicit reference to the Lake People: 'We are the Lake People,' which she described as 'We live on the Lake. We call the Lake Goddess Uhamiri or Ogbuide. We sometimes call her Mother. She is the Mother of all of us' (Nwapa 2017, 186–7). But even in her first novel, *Efuru*, the Lake People's identification with

[14] In his study of traditional Igbo political systems, Nzimiro describes Akpatakuma as a male cult, which had the main function of giving strength to all Oguta people during war and protect the fighters against bullets and machete wounds (Nzimiro 1972, 139).

and reverence of the Lake Goddess is portrayed in a warm, even humorous style:

> There were some white people swimming. Some of them were fishing in their noisy boats. Nwosu and the fisherman stared at them for a long time, shook their heads, and paddled on.
>
> 'Are they not a queer lot? To come all the way to swim and fish here.'
>
> 'They are strange people. They come every time to fish, but they catch nothing.'
>
> 'How can they catch anything when they do not observe the rules of the woman of the lake. And look at their boats, how can they catch anything in such noisy boats. Fish swim away from them, and besides they disturb the woman of the lake with their boats.'
>
> 'It is a wonder she does not capsize their offensive boats and drown them all,' said the fisherman in annoyance.
>
> 'You forget, my friend, that our woman of the lake is the kindest of women, kinder to strangers than to her own people. She is very understanding. She knows that the white people are strangers to our land, that's why she is lenient with them. We, her people, dare not be so disrespectful.'
>
> Why do the white women wear tight dresses for swimming? Why don't they use wrappas as our women do? They have no shame; they do not know that they are naked.'
>
> 'You are right. But what beats me is their idleness. How can they leave the comfort of their homes in the big towns and come to swim all day in the lake?'
>
> The two men paddled on. They reached the shrine of the woman of the lake.
>
> 'We have returned, the great woman of the lake; the most beautiful of women; the kindest of women; your children have returned safely.' Having thus paid their respects, they moved on. (Nwapa 2016, 202)

Through her aesthetic worlds, Nwapa narrated a relational ontology of sacralized nature, spiritual interconnectedness and collective being. Similarly to how the aquatic epistemologies of black communities in the river basins in the Pacific Coast region in Colombia can be seen as 'constituting a relational ontology' (Oslender 2018, 137), so can the life worlds of the Lake People in Oguta. Escobar recognizes that 'lifeways based on radical

interdependence' are common in the 'cosmovisions of the original peoples in many parts of the world'; they are 'embodied in practices centered on territory, kinship, spirituality, ritual, the arts, and relationships with the environment' (Escobar 2020, 15–16). He ascertains that these places are 'experienced and constructed on a profoundly relational ontology', which is 'based on the idea that territories are living beings with memories, spaces in which the sacred and the everyday are lived experiences' (Escobar 2020, 16). In Oguta, as Sabine Jell-Bahlsen has described in ethnographic detail, '[a]ll of the indigenous deities and particularly the ever-present lake goddess are reflected in the people's daily conduct, their cosmology, spirituality, aesthetics, and perception of the universe' (Jell-Bahlsen 2014, 5). And, as recounted by Akuzor Anozia, current chief priestess of the Oguta Lake Goddess, in the documentary film *House of Nwapa*, 'whoever is serving Ogbuide will also serve the other gods and goddesses' (Nwelue 2016, 1:03).

The reverence of water and earth spirits, as well as the coexistence of ancestral spirits and other spiritual forces, points to a relational ontology par excellence. It is a cosmovision of radical interdependence between human, natural and spiritual worlds.

In addition to capturing the relational ontologies of the Lake People, Flora Nwapa also engaged in womanist worldmaking. In his emphasis on radical interdependence, Escobar valorizes 'matriztic ontologies', describing how 'matriztic cultures' were 'historically characterized by conversations emphasizing inclusion, participation, collaboration, coinspiration, respect and mutual acceptance, sacredness, and the recurrent, cyclical renewal of life' (Escobar 2020, 17). While modern society is dominated by patriarchal culture, he notes that some 'matriztic practices persist in contemporary modern cultures' (Escobar 2020, 17). Since the notion of matriztic culture offers a more nuanced understanding of gendered social orders than matriarchy, emphasizing interdependence instead of domination, it has interesting resemblances with womanism (Ogunyemi 1996; Phillips 2006). But to avoid earlier fallacies of reading matriarchy into goddess worship (Silverstein and Lewin 2016, 11), which has also been the case in feminist analyses of Nwapa's work (e.g. Stratton 1994), it is worth paying attention to the centrality of gender

complementarity in African womanism as well as Igbo/Oguta cosmology (Ogunyemi 1996; Jell-Bahlsen 2014). As much as Nwapa focused on Ogbuide, the Lake Goddess is but one part of a divine pair; her husband, River God Urashi, is of equal significance. Yet Flora Nwapa's 'womanist ideology causes her to gravitate toward female characters', not least to show that men and women are 'mutually dependent' (Ogunyemi 1996, 135).

Nwapa's womanist worldmaking can thus be appreciated as a transition discourse that invoked sacred powers to depict other possible worlds. In his search for tools for rethinking reality and the possible, Escobar draws attention to the 'spaces that might reveal the existence of other worlds—other forms of knowing~doing~being' (Escobar 2020, 13). Literature clearly offers such a space, providing inspiring narratives of other worlds, while creating possible worlds in the ongoing conversation of worldmaking. From this perspective, we should be able to start grasping the ontological potency of Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worldmaking. For now, let me just allude to the force of her literary worldmaking, acknowledging that her writing at the crossroads conveyed 'the complexity, ambiguities, and contradictions of her environment as they are embodied in the force that lies on the bottom of the lake, *Uhamiri*, the goddess of the crossroads' (Nnaemeka 1995, 104).

3. Celebrating Children in Abuja

Swimming pool, art galleries and TV interview

Abuja was what I had expected from Lagos: a modern city with smooth highways and modern buildings. It was also what I had not expected from Lagos: neat and orderly. 'Abuja is boring; Lagos is so much fun,' a friend of Salamatu's reflected as he drove us back to my hotel, repeating a common stereotype image of the two cities, exciting Lagos as opposed to dull Abuja. I had been in Abuja a few days already, enjoying the sheer comfort of things working well. The hotel was fabulous: power cuts were rapidly dealt with through generators, the shower had hot water and marvellous water pressure, and the spacious room had a sitting area as well as desk. Never mind that the wallpaper was stained from humidity or that the door had to be pulled hard to lock. I was enjoying the creature comforts of the hotel. The best of it all: a pool! A clean, outdoor pool that I had all to myself. It was a luxurious way to wake up.

Savannah Suites and Hotel in Area 3 became my home for a few days, and I settled into a very comfortable routine. Early-morning swimming, followed by a scrumptious breakfast of my choice, with coffee. Laptop and phone always charged, allowing me to take notes, upload photos on Facebook and check my email, any time. Laundry service, my clothes neatly packaged in thin plastic bags when delivered. Food and drinks in the hotel restaurant, a bit pricy but a menu with everything from club sandwich to Indian curry with jollof rice. In the evenings I treated myself to cold Star beer by the pool side, while typing my notes and chatting with friends through Facebook or calling Mom and friends through Skype on my phone.

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Salamatu was in charge of me in Abuja and she took her job seriously. She called on me at least once a day and phoned me from time to time. She was young and energetic, busy establishing herself as Nigeria's first female literary agent. Salamatu had a vast network of contacts that she handled very well, making connections when suitable, and, not shy, she could call upon anyone, regardless of status. Salamatu always covered her head with a scarf, her dresses long and typically quite loose, not only because she was thin but also as a mark of modesty befitting a young urban Muslim woman. The scar on her cheek gave character to her pretty face, a dramatic twist to her gentle features, while her measured accent augmented her femininity.

In her efforts to expose me to Abuja's cultural scene, Salamatu took me to the Thought Pyramid Art Gallery on Libreville Street in a middle-class neighbourhood. She had picked the place for our interview for its quietness. The building itself was impressive: stone walls, large decorated wooden doors, and life-size sculptures. The art on the walls was equally inspiring: paintings of various sizes as well as sculptures in wood and metal, rendered with exquisite creative talent. I was awestruck by a painting of a city street in dusky rain; could barely tear my eyes off it. Photographs were not allowed, only selfies. Amused by the restriction, I took a few selfies in front of some of the paintings that I liked the most. We were the only people upstairs, but Salamatu's phone kept ringing. The conference scheduled for the following day, 3 December, was not being prepared as planned. The local chair was not reachable and another university colleague had stepped in. Meanwhile, Salamatu was trying to assist from a distance. After a while I suggested we simply reschedule the interview.

Having observed the elegance of Nigerian women, I realized I needed some more dresses and Salamatu took me to a friend who was a designer. We met up in her office and she drove us to her workshop on the outskirts of town, a room with racks of clothes and a small fitting area, drawn with a curtain. Dresses of varying styles, all of them long, showed that the designer was a Muslim lady. I picked a few dresses with their help and tried them on. They all fit very nicely and were comfortable to wear. The design was unlike any other dress I had, but I felt inspired by

the feminine cut. In the end I picked three dresses, for the total cost of 32,000 naira. I was still unsure of the exchange rate, but figured they cost around US$70. I did not have enough cash with me, but the designer agreed that Salamatu could transfer money to her as soon as I had changed some dollars.

On 6 December the conference took place at the University of Abuja, which turned out to be quite far away. The campus was enormous and it took us a while to find the English Department. The departments were scattered around campus, with few signs to lead the way. 'How on earth do students move between buildings?' I thought to myself. Well, some of them simply walked by the roadside, I soon noticed.

The event was reasonably well attended, with some 100–150 people, mostly students, who had been encouraged to attend in the last minute. Several dignitaries gave welcoming and opening remarks, including Leslye Obiora, former minister of mines and professor of law at Arizona State University, as well as cousin to Flora Nwapa's children. Obiora underlined the celebration of creativity in her eloquent remarks. The conference tone was academic, with lots of paper presentations by established scholars. The quality was remarkably high and many presenters used critical feminist theories in their analysis of *Efuru* and Flora Nwapa. I was particularly impressed by young male scholars using feminist theory, a progressive move in male-dominated academia.

After the conference I went to the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), for my first ever television interview. An NTA representative had approached me during the children's carnival a few days earlier, asking for an interview for their morning show. They had also scheduled TV interviews with Flora Nwapa's children. Salamatu accompanied me to the NTA, which helped me feel a bit less nervous, since she knew the place and many of the staff. We were greeted by the programme host and she led us to the studio. The studio had a sitting area by the wall, with a small sofa and armchair around a low table. Two large film cameras mounted on tripods were positioned a few metres away. The host asked me to sit on the sofa while they prepared the microphone, which she asked me to slip under my dress. The sound check took a while – someone had to find batteries – but eventually we were

set to go. While waiting, the host asked me a few questions, which she used in the interview. She had googled me and found some data that she used as a basis: research topics, publications, arguments I had made.

During the interview, I answered as clearly as I could. She slipped in some lifestyle questions (my house in Tanzania that I had just told her about; some words in Swahili), my favourite Nigerian food (jollof rice), what I did to relax (walks in nature; she quickly moved on, seemingly unimpressed). She also asked me about Efuru@50 and what I thought of the event. At last she asked if I was a bookworm, which took me aback. I simply responded that I loved books since books allow you to travel. She concluded by noting that, unlike what one would expect from an academic (someone who sits inside reading books), I came across as quite extroverted. I realized that our worlds were quite far apart. The whole thing was over in just half an hour, to my relief. Salamatu assured me it had gone very well and showed all the pictures she had taken. I posted one on Facebook, feeling rather excited about this 'first' TV interview ever.

On our way back to the hotel, we stopped at a corner and Salamatu bought some local delicacies: *suya* (barbecued meat) and *masa* (rice cake). We ate it straight from the newspaper it was wrapped in, using our fingers. It was absolutely delicious. The beef had been marinated and gently barbecued, cut into small pieces covered by succulent spices. It was a popular snack, and I could see why: one of the best barbecued meats I had ever tasted.

I was thoroughly enjoying Nigerian food culture and I could see why eating was a recurring topic in conversations. Considerable care went into the selection of food during meals, since there was always great variety. Pepper (chilli) was commonly used to add flavour. Food was served in large portions and I rarely managed to finish a plate. Not that eating a lot was in any way badly seen: quite the contrary. As one man announced during a meal, 'It is good when the woman eats a lot; it shows that her husband has strong capacity.'

ꕥ

'Life in Europe is not all that great; you have to do everything by yourself!' a young woman sitting at our table exclaimed. I was having some drinks with Uzoma and his friends at a local beer garden and the kitchen had just whipped out a delicious snack: a large fish cooked in its entirety, wrapped in foil with aromatic spices and tender vegetables. We all dug in, taking small pieces of fish with our hands, washing them down with cold beer. A testimony to Nigerian food culture, I thought to myself; even local beer joints serve excellent food. The discussion had steered towards complaints about how certain things were not working in Nigeria and how much better life was in the West. The woman recalled a good friend of hers who was living in Europe. Before she left, she had been beautiful and healthy; nowadays she looked thin and haggard. The reason was that she was overwhelmed with all household duties she had to perform, in addition to working long hours. In Nigeria, she would have had a house girl and a cook to help her out, even someone to look after the children. I readily agreed with the woman. Unlike Nigeria, where house help was quite common, and taken for granted among the urban middle class, in Europe few could afford such luxuries. Instead, people had to take care of household duties themselves.

Life in Nigeria was obviously quite pleasant, for the privileged. In Abuja, I had seen some of the mansions of the very rich, but there was also a numerous middle class that enjoyed comfortable housing, with affordable services provided by the less well-to-do. Roads were well kept and most of the cars were in good condition, many of them large SUVs or pickup trucks. Abuja also had a sophisticated culture scene, with bookshops and art galleries.

Salamatu took me to The Booksellers Ltd, a well-stocked bookshop in a small compound, with a cafeteria in the inner courtyard. Next to the entrance door was a large roll-up poster advertising a new book, and the shop sign above the door promised the place to be 'Nigeria's Favourite Bookshop'. It was Salamatu's favourite bookshop and she knew the owners well, warmly greeting them as we entered. She sometimes arranged readings in the bookshop, she explained to me. I was impressed by the rows and rows of bookshelves, and the tall shelves lining the walls. Hundreds of

books were on display, not least textbooks on everything from media and management to medical science and mathematics. There were also shelves dedicated to children's books as well as secondary school books. And a whole bookcase devoted to motivational books, a very popular genre in Tanzania as well.

What impressed me the most were the many shelves of literature, from classics to bestsellers. The bestsellers included spy novels and thrillers by writers like Ian Fleming, Colin Forbes and Clive Cussler. By contrast, the classics were predominantly the works of African writers, especially Nigerian writers. The 50th anniversary edition of *Efuru* was prominently displayed. The newly released and much-talked-about *A Conspiracy of Ravens* (2016) by Othuke Ominiabohs was also shown on the top shelf, and on the shelf underneath was a large collection of the African Writers Series. Near the counter were biographies of famous Nigerians, like the politician Tony Anenih's *My Life and Nigerian Politics* and *Audacity on the Bound: A Diplomatic Odyssey* by Ambassador Olusola Sanu. Biography is another popular genre, often commissioned by established writers, sometimes as anonymous ghostwriters. Bolanle Awe's newly released *Nigerian Women Pioneers & Icons* (2016) was also featured on the shelf. On a low table near the counter I spotted *A Treasury of African Folktales* (2016), compiled by Ikeogu Oke, Helon Habila and Wale Okediran. Next to it was the latest issue of *Ebedi Review*, a publication of the Ebedi International Writers Residency, run by Wale Okediran, containing stories and pictures of recent writers in residence, along with poems, tributes and reviews. Little did I know that I would have a poem published in *Ebedi Review* a year later (Uimonen 2017).

Children's carnival at Efuru@50

The children's carnival took place on Saturday, 3rd December, at the NTA Arena, in the NTA compound. The arena was a large open ground paved with bricks, with an elevated stage at the front. The stage was decorated with green and white banners of cloth suspended from the flat roof and a large plastic poster at the back, carrying the Efuru@50 logo and announcing the event: NATIONAL CELEBRATION OF FLORA NWAPA'S

EFURU@50; PIONEER OF AFRICAN WOMEN LITERATURE, along with the date (SATURDAY 3rd DECEMBER 2016), venue (NTA ARENA) and time (10 am PROMPT). Names of the national and local organizers were printed at the bottom of the poster. The open ground was surrounded by auditoriums, eight levels of wide concrete steps, covered with aluminium roofing. Rows of upholstered chairs had been placed on the steps, plastic chairs on the topmost ones. At the entrance was a table with Flora Nwapa's books on display.

The event started around 11:30, somewhat later than scheduled. Chinyere was the MC and stood in the middle of the ground, asking students to explain what the celebration was all about. She then called on individuals for the high table, starting with the guest of honour, the representative for the director general of the National Council for Arts and Culture. She then called the children of Flora Nwapa; Elizabeth Ben-Iheanacho, director of the National Council for Arts and Culture; and Professor Vicky Sylvester, University of Abuja. To my great surprise, she also called me to the high table. I was not all that pleased, since I had planned to walk around the arena to take pictures and video footage, but had to respect protocol and comply. Chinyere then introduced the eight schools that were present. More than 200 students were seated on the rows of chairs, neatly dressed in their school uniforms, their teachers sitting next to them. In the VIP section, some 20 guests were seated, many of them family friends.

The event was kicked off with the national anthem, accompanied by a young man playing the flute. Everyone stood up and many sang along. The representative of the director general delivered brief and concise welcoming remarks, encouraging the children to develop their talent, noting how the creative industries contributed to national development. She used Michael Jackson as an example of international success from an early age.

The student quiz followed, with eight competing schools, each represented by three students, male and female. The students were seated on upholstered chairs at the bottom of the auditorium, with the judges and moderator sitting at a table in the opposite auditorium. Students got to choose questions by number. The questions focused on characters and relations in *Efuru*, along with critical events. Some of the questions had multiple-choice answers. The

sound system was not altogether clear and students struggled to hear the questions. One question led to vivid discussion. The students had answered it correctly, contrary to the judge's response, and, following heated argument, the question was excluded. The competition was clearly taken very seriously. Similarly to the other venues, the winning teams were awarded with gifts of books.

A drama competition came next, with four competing groups, each allotted 20 minutes. The groups ranged from four to 20 performing students. Each group gave their own rendering of *Efuru*, often focusing on dramatic turns like her initial elopement after falling in love, marriage negotiations with her father, the painful delivery and later tragic death of her child. The students used local wrappers for costumes, female students often wearing two pieces, a short skirt and another wrapper around their chest, their bellies exposed. Some wore beads in their hair and around their necks, their faces marked with make-up. Male students wore wrappers around their shoulders and T-shirts underneath, and those who acted fathers and senior men had white beards drawn on their faces. Props like clay pots, baskets and walking sticks were also used. The student actors were barefoot, thus accentuating the village setting.

It had already reached afternoon and the sun was blazing on the open ground. I was struggling to get some footage from the high table, but the light settings were not adequate for the contrasts between bright open ground and shaded auditoriums. Rapidly whirling ceiling fans offered some respite from the heat that was building up, and the bottles of water and soft drink that were placed at the high table offered some welcome refreshment.

TV crew from the NTA filmed the event, expertly moving around with their film cameras. They also interviewed people from the high table, including myself, asking us to comment the event. The programme was concluded with music performances by some students, who rapped to soundtracks blasting from the loudspeakers, their body language copied from American hip-hop.

The cultural framing of the children's carnival emphasized learning. Here the process of heightened reflexivity used the fictitious character of Efuru for educational purposes, students cramming details of the novel in preparation of the quiz. The novel was thus used as images and symbols of a social world outside

the event that could be scrutinized, assessed and revalued (Turner 1987, 117). The social world of Efuru was also 'remodelled and rearranged' through dramatizations (Turner 1987, 117). Similarly to the performance of ethnography in anthropology classes (Turner 1987, 152–3), the dramatizations enabled students to immerse themselves in another cultural world, familiarizing themselves with Igbo cultural practices, using props and costumes to visualize the material culture of a traditional village. The competitive edge of quizzes and dramas framed the carnival in a contemporary educational mode, forming children as neoliberal subjects rather than members of close-knit communities. The nationalistic framing of the carnival also positioned the students as citizens of the imagined community of Nigeria.

Through the student carnival, Flora Nwapa's sphere of virtual influence was extended to future generations. At the carnival, students served as the distant others who witness the value transformation of fame, separated from the social life of Flora Nwapa by several decades, thus showing how her influence had 'become available in other times and places' (Munn 1986, 117). As participants in the Efuru@50 celebration, students were made aware

Figure 5. Student dramatizations of *Efuru*. Photograph by author.

of Flora Nwapa's fame, while their own enactment of *Efuru* internalized the writer's literary legacy. The children's carnival thus played a catalytic role in the expansion of intersubjective spacetime, carrying Flora Nwapa's fame into the future through coming generations.

The mediatized carnival extended Flora Nwapa's fame even further, reaching thousands if not millions of TV viewers. Hosted by NTA, the broadcasting of the children's carnival broadened the outreach, bringing in TV audiences as complementary witnesses. Meanwhile, the broadcast of the event meant that it was audio visually recorded, archived for an unspecified time, thus expanding the intersubjective spacetime into an unspecified future.

Flora Nwapa's children's literature and *Mammywater*

A pioneer at many levels, Flora Nwapa wrote literature for children and she was also 'the first female publisher of children's books in Nigeria' (Okoye 1998, 583). At the time, few Nigerian writers wrote books for children. If anything, in his introduction to a collection of academic essays on Nwapa's children's literature, Emenyonu starts by noting: 'Children's literature in Nigeria has over the years suffered abysmal neglect by writers, publishers, literary critics and even by educators and policy makers in education' (Emenyonu 1998a, 567). Early writers, most of whom were male, seemed more preoccupied with 'telling the ugly stories of colonialism with its heinous extensions of cultural alienation and neo-colonial outrages', while 'they ignored creating literature for the young minds' (Emenyonu 1998b, 590). Meanwhile, publishers paid 'the least attention' to children's literature, partly because it could be imported from abroad (Emenyonu 1998a, 567). Indeed, the middle-aged women writers I interviewed for this study all grew up with Western children's literature, typically fairy tales like Aladdin, Cinderella and Snow White. Most of them only started reading African literature in secondary school.

Flora Nwapa could draw on her various social roles in the creation of children's literature, not only as a woman writer but also as a mother, teacher, educator and social worker (Emenyonu 1998b, 605–6). While she wrote for her own children, she was also motivated by the 'socio-cultural crusade' of writing 'appropriately

and effectively for children in the Nigerian situation' (Emenyonu 1998b, 590). Her children's books conveyed her ability to see the world from a children's perspective, while offering social, cultural and moral guidance for their development. As Brooks concluded, 'Nwapa aids them [children] in the socialization process, and at the same time gives them the joy of reading a good story' (Brooks 1998, 624).

The style and content of Flora Nwapa's children's literature offers yet another example of creolized aesthetics. Similarly to Eugenia's jollof writing, Flora Nwapa's children's books combined the creative impetus of orature and literature, drawing on a rich tradition of folktales as well as modern illustrated children's books. In a Nigerian context, traditional orature has often been designed for acculturation and socialization, not least of children, through myths, folktales and riddles (Emenyonu 1998a, 567–8). Indeed, it has been argued that the close relationship between traditional orature and modern literature is particularly poignant in African children's literature, which often contains discernible elements of folktales to instil traditional norms and worldviews (Agbasiere 1998, 571). This didactic orientation is common in children's books, which tend to both educate and entertain, through words and images. Well educated and exposed to Western culture, Flora Nwapa was quite familiar with Western children's books and could thus create her own combination of Western and African literature for children. But, to distribute her works, she had to establish her own publishing house to get around the political economy of children's literature dominated by Western publishers, as discussed further in Chapter 4.

In terms of literary worldmaking, Flora Nwapa created worlds from a children's perspective and made children heroes in these imaginary worlds. In this sense, she also departed from traditional orature, positioning the child not only as a receiver but also as producer of knowledge, thus conveying a modern perspective on childhood. The 'literary revolutionary' aspect of her children's literature has been acknowledged by scholars, her child-heroes paving the way for 'children-empowerment', in fiction as well as real life (Emenyonu 1998a, 569). Similarly, calling Nwapa's fictional children *explorers in the universe*, Agbasiere has noted how Nwapa encouraged children to be creative and independent:

> To her [Flora Nwapa], children should be given ample opportunity to assume responsible positions as early as possible. In her children's stories, most of the child-characters are bold, intelligent and possess a high sense of responsibility. They are actors whose actions make a positive impact on their immediate environment and on their own personality. They are hero-voyagers and the world is seen from the perspective of the child. (Agbasiere 1998, 572)

Flora Nwapa also engaged her own children when writing children's books. I asked Ejine, Nwapa's first-born child, about her experiences of children's literature when growing up. She responded as follows by email on 28 July 2017:

Paula: Did your mother involve you in the writing of her children's books?

Ejine: Yes she did. I had the opportunity to read everything she wrote before it was published. The stories usually came out of things my brother Uzoma and Sister Amede experienced growing up. I would read and give her my opinion. Sometimes she would edit based on what I said and other times she would explain why she had written it that way and would leave it.

Paula: Which was your favourite among her children's books?

Ejine: *Journey to Space*.

In *Journey to Space* (Nwapa [1980] 1988), Eze and his sister Ngozi play in a lift, which shoots up through the roof into the air. The lift takes off when the children disobey an older man who warns them about playing in lifts, so the man casts a spell on them. During their space journey they meet a dog and two fairies. The dog is on a mission to get a precious stone for animals from the moon, so that they can live forever, having lost their immortality when they were forced into the animal world on earth. The fairies have been alerted to the children needing some help. After some time, the children find their journey dangerous and return home to their parents. The story is illustrated with drawings, printed in black and white. After giving me a copy of the book, Ejine's brother Uzoma told me that they used to play in lifts, often jumping, which seems to have inspired their mother's story, who always warned them not to play in lifts.

While Flora Nwapa's fictional children played centre stage, she also imbued their imaginary worlds with Nigerian/African cultural values. Far from being representations of cultural transformation towards Westernized individualization, her children were cast as modern Africans. Just like Flora Nwapa herself, her child-characters straddled different worlds, African, Western and imaginary. The creolized aesthetic thus played out in her construction of cultural identities, which combined modern and traditional, Western and African norms and values. At a time of profound social transformation, she imbued her characters with cultural identities that could enhance their agency, without the risks of cultural loss.

Flora Nwapa imparted elements of Igbo culture in particular. Not only did she use Igbo names for many of her characters, but she also drew upon Igbo folktales and traditional beliefs, in some cases adjusting or correcting cultural practices that she did not entirely endorse. For example, her first children's book, *Emeka-Driver's Guard* (1972), challenged the traditional taboo of twins, thus addressing 'cultural issues of gender and multiple births' (Brooks 1998, 612). Rather than letting her baby girl die, as villagers advise her, the mother sends the twins, a boy and a girl, to the town to stay with their aunt. While the girl is industrious and prospers, the boy behaves immaturely and fails in school, thus learning from experience that discipline and hard work is necessary for success and happiness (Brooks 1998, 614). Brooks underlines that the social relations Nwapa describes build on the Igbo moral value system, especially the extended family and kinship system (Brooks 1998, 613). But Nwapa also challenged traditional practices.

In *Mammywater* (1979), Flora Nwapa drew on Oguta cosmology. It was her second published children's book, and it offered an adjusted version of the mythical Lake Goddess. In her literary portrayal of the Lake Goddess, Nwapa could draw on women's stories. Similarly to many other African women writers, she had 'listened to and learned from their foremothers' storytelling' (Nnaemeka 1997, 13). In an interview with Sabine Jell-Bahlsen in 1988, Flora Nwapa reflected on how she grew up with stories about Mammywater, despite her parents' objection to such supposedly pagan beliefs (Jell-Bahlsen 1998, 644):

S[abine]: Why are you so interested in Mammywater?

N[wapa]: That is what I was talking about. It is because I have been told these fantastic stories about Mammywater and lots and lots of things about her building under the water. Then there was something about her palm tree that attracted my attention and how she came out and met with human beings. These are the stories that you believed as a child, as you believe in father Christmas. My children do. So that was the sort of thing I believed in. But I would have thought that I would really have been a worshipper […]

S: Because you have eventually found peace?

N: [Laughs] I should have been a worshipper. But maybe it is my Western education that prevented me from being a worshipper. If I did not receive this kind of education…

E [Chief Francis Ebiri]: Then you could have been a worshipper, but then…

N: […] But then my Christian background […] because my parents were the children of the first converts. My two grandmothers were Christians. They baptised us almost at the same time. Then they were fanatics about Christianity. We were exposed to so many things. We children were not allowed to do certain things, like talking about Mammywater. My [parents] called her worship 'paganism'; they talked of 'heathens' […] But then I was lucky because I went to live with my grandmother at a very early age in a huge compound. Not only my mother, but there were so many women who were not Christians. That was a more relaxed atmosphere. There I was able to listen to all those stories of Mammywater, Okita, and all those things.

In an anthology on African children's literature, Flora Nwapa recounted how she completed *Mammywater* in 'two days of intensive writing', a few days after visiting Oguta together with the late Michael Crowder, a historian who wanted to visit the town (Nwapa 1997, 268). They had paddled a canoe to the confluence of the lake and Urashi river, and down the river. 'As we went along,

I pointed out to Michael Crowder the landmarks of the lake, the shrine and the abode of the woman of the lake, where the blue waters were deepest. I told him the stories associated with her and how she is held in awe until this day' (Nwapa 1997, 268).

In her recollection, Flora Nwapa clarified that 'Mammywater is not a folktale, but it is rather a story based on the beliefs and traditions of the people of Oguta. The Goddess of the Lake pervades the lives of the lake people, both men and women. She is mysterious, and this mystery moves in every sentence for most of the book' (Nwapa 1997, 268). In her story, Nwapa made a child a protagonist, thus depicting the spirit world from a child's perspective (Agbasiere 1998, 574). She also demystified the Lake Goddess to make her accessible to children, while retaining her supernatural powers (Emenyonu 1998b, 596).

Mammywater offers yet another example of Flora Nwapa's womanist worldmaking, emphasizing gender complementarity and environmentally anchored spirituality (Ogunyemi 1996; Phillips 2006). The story of Mammywater is told together with the story of her husband Urashi, linked to their different domains, the clear lake and the muddy river respectively, thus bringing forth gender complementarity, along with environmental and spiritual coexistence. Throughout the story, the line between human and spiritual worlds are blurred, as Deke and his family enter and exit the spiritual realm, while the water spirits also engage in human activities. In one of the dialogues between Deke and Mammywater, the existential essence of spiritual life is spelled out:

> 'Do you know how old I am?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'I have lived here since the beginning of the world.'
>
> 'True. You look younger than my mother. I don't believe you.' Mammywater laughs again showing her white teeth. She is so beautiful. 'I have lived here since the beginning of the world' she tells Deke.
>
> 'You will not die?'
>
> 'Die, no. I am a spirit. Spirits don't die. We live for ever.' (Nwapa 1979, 14)

In Flora Nwapa's *Mammywater* the creolized aesthetic works at several levels, from narrative structure to religious beliefs and

cultural practices. Scholars have noted that the use of questions and answers in the narrative dialogue corresponds to an Igbo proverb: one who asks questions never gets lost (Emenyonu 1998b, 596). Through question-and-answer techniques (Okoye 1998, 588), Flora Nwapa thus combined Igbo cultural norms and practices with modern writing. She also used the literary form to impart certain cultural practices, like the breaking of a kola nut in Igbo rites of hospitality (Brooks 1998, 616).

More significantly, in writing a book about Mammywater, Flora Nwapa acknowledged the existence of the Lake Goddess, not just as a mythical being but as a significant deity in Oguta cosmology. Through her literary work, Nwapa could thus portray creolized religious beliefs that combined traditional religion and Christianity, a theme she pursued throughout her writing career, especially in her last novel. In so doing, she challenged the dominance of Christianity, writing against the political economy of leading religious institutions and religious colonialism (see also Sabine 2008). Even today, there is considerable tension between Christians and worshippers of Ogbuide and other local deities in Oguta, as discussed in the previous chapter. Far from rejecting Oguta cosmology, Flora Nwapa imparted the norms and values of local value systems to future generations, following the cosmopolitan orientation of her creolized aesthetics, while nurturing children with the relational worldview of other possible worlds.

Elizabeth Ben-Iheanacho and *African Tales for Children*

I first met Lizi at the children's carnival, where she was one of the guests of honour at the high table. Strikingly beautiful, with high cheekbones, her features highlighted with carefully applied make-up and a full African figure, her tailored batik dress accentuating her curves, Lizi was the elegant embodiment of African femininity. Smiling and laughing, while peering through her glasses with a twinkle in the eye, Lizi's creative intelligence shone through her charismatic personality. When she delivered her paper at the Efuru@50 literary conference at the University of Abuja on 6 December, she spoke with a clear and confident voice, vividly gesticulating for emphasis. I interviewed Lizi on 12 December in the restaurant of my hotel. We have also been Facebook friends ever

since. After the interview I jotted in my notebook: 'Lizi is a powerful woman, full of life, bursting with creative energy. Confident, eloquent, insightful.' I should add: with a great sense of humor, as we laughed throughout the interview.

Dr Elizabeth Ben-Iheanacho works as director of research and documentation at the National Council for Art and Culture in Abuja. Born in 1965, she is ethnically Igbo (she checked my spelling as I jotted it down in my notebook) and Christian by persuasion. Her late father was a banker and writer, her mother a nurse, a caregiver. She went to a community-owned primary school and a Catholic missionary secondary school that was then run by the government, both public. The language of instruction was English and she recalled pupils being fined if caught speaking their native language. In church, however, they were encouraged to read the Bible and sing hymns in Igbo. Lizi holds a PhD in literature from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria (1995) and a BA from the University of Benin (1986). Her mother tongue is Igbo and she also speaks English. She was married 'very well', to a media practitioner, and they separated 'very well', she remarked laughingly. She has three children, including a boy and a girl who are twins.

As a child, Lizi read 'everything that I could lay my hands on'. From the *Ladybird* stories to the Andersen tales, in the languages she could read, that is, English and Igbo. There was literature available in Igbo language too, she reflected, 'because there was this deliberate effort to generate reading material for students in Igbo language'. So her reading was 'diverse'. Her dad was her greatest supplier of reading materials: 'the guy was in love with words' and bought her books, not least for her birthday. Her father bequeathed her a 'fantastic library', including every single book from the original African Writers Series. With access to her father's library, she also read books that were not meant for her age: classics, street literature and magazines. Literacy was highly valued in the community where she grew up. Nowadays she reads 'everything too'. She reads academic texts for work, but also literature, 'for the love of it'. She reads a lot of contemporary Nigerian writers. As for non-Nigerian literature, she reads what is available in the bookshop, depending on her interests as well

as affordability. She does not read electronic books but prefers to leaf through a book, appreciating its materiality.

Lizi started writing shortly after leaving secondary school in 1980 and at the time there was an 'interesting development in the Nigerian literary scene'. This was the Pacesetter books, published by Macmillan. They made 'street literature, young adult literature available more regularly', as opposed to what they were used to reading, namely European texts sent to Africa. By contrast, the Pacesetter books were 'written by Nigerians, our stories told for us, by us, and capturing the things that were of interest to the growing child'. After reading a couple of them, Lizi figured she could also write; she could even tell better stories. She wrote something, but 'went shy' and did not understand the dynamics of publishing. Given her love of literature, it was 'inevitable' that she would write, but it was above all her mum who challenged her. Being a hard-headed, practical woman, the mother had remarked on the large quantity of books in the house, suggesting Lizi should just write her own stories.

Lizi sees herself as a *folklorist*, 'a beneficiary of the twilight zone of the folktale, and its role in the agrarian communities of Nigeria where they flourished'. When growing up, that was the form of 'entertainment', the norm for 'value transmission', and 'training' in the ability to recount tales and tweak them to make them interesting. When she started writing, she was trying to pass the same message to her readers.

Most of Lizi's published works are for children and young adults, in the folkloric genre, and she also writes short stories as well as some prose and poetry. In terms of content, she aims for mass appeal, beyond the children's focus, but her writing is still guided by the moral of the story, its lesson, the value it passes on. 'I don't know how to do art for art's sake,' Lizi reflected; 'for me, art must speak to its chosen audience.' In addition to children and young adults, she writes for the wider reading public, if they have time to read. She writes foremost for Africans, and does not really have a non-African audience in mind: 'I tell our story to resonate with those who can first identify with it before the universal thing.'

Lizi has published four works of fiction, under her maiden name Lizi Ashimole. Her first publication was the poetic novel *The Groundnut Child* (Ashimole 2004), followed by *Just in Case* (Ashimole 2005), a collection of short stories for young adults. In 2007, she published *Tales by the Fluorescent* (Ashimole 2007), thus updating the cultural practice of storytelling by moonlight. It won the 2007 ANA/Atiku Abubakar Children's Literature Prize. After that came *African Tales for Children* (Ashimole 2009), with two stories and hand-drawn colour illustrations by Amulu Onyeka Alexander. True to her aims to entertain and educate, the stories explore moral values like selfless sacrifice for the community and the anxieties that money can bring. In the story 'Olekanma and the Famine', the little girl Kanma, who has lost her whole family to the famine, sacrifices her only possession, a doll, to appease the Guardian Spirit of the land, as advised by the wise men of the village. Unlike the queen and the king, who do not want to part with their treasures, Olekanma sees no problem in figuring out a valuable sacrifice, since 'she only had her doll to give' (Ashimole 2009, 37–9):

She thought of her grandpa
who carved the doll.
She thought of her daddy
who painted it bright.
She thought of her mommy
who sang to the doll.
She thought of her grandma
Who tied it to her back.
And Kanma went to the village square
and left her doll at the Guardian Spirit's house.

The next day when the village woke up,
Behold the wosh! Wosh!! of the rain.
It fell in drops, it filled the streets
and Kanma smiled at the fresh green grass.

When Kanma, beloved of all,
died of good old age,
The Guardian Spirit took

her up to the skies with Him.
And now some evenings bright and clear
you'll see Kanma smiling her sweet smile
Up in the moon which is her new home.

Lizi's writing for children is comparable with that of Flora Nwapa, both combining folktales and storytelling techniques with modern literary forms, through a creolized aesthetic. In the context of children's literature, the creolized aesthetic enables writers to write across cultures as well as across generations. They can tell stories that speak to children in their particular cultural context, while passing on historically shaped norms and values, reconfigured for the present.

The political economy of the creolized aesthetic becomes particularly poignant in the challenges of publishing children's literature, which have been dominated by international publishing houses. As noted above, one of the reasons why Flora Nwapa established her own publishing company was to publish children's books. As scholars have pointed out, children's literature has 'suffered abysmal neglect' by the various literary actors involved (Emenyonu 1998a, 567). These days, children's literature continues to be marginalized.

Like most other writers, Lizi singles out publishing as a main challenge for writers in Nigeria. It is difficult to get a publisher interested, so writers often self-publish or pay a publishing house for the imprint and market the book themselves. When it comes to children's books, the challenge is even greater. Unless a book is listed in the approved reading list of the educational system, parents will not buy the book. Lizi has pitched her books at book fairs, and children are instantly drawn to the colourful covers. Lizi uses colour to attract children, knowing that she is competing with television for their attention, similarly to how Flora Nwapa was well aware of the need to publish visually appealing children's book in 'the era of the television' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1998, 193). Lizi also produces her books in a small, portable format. But, even though children and their parents find the books attractive, the parents do not purchase them, preferring instead the officially listed textbooks. The affordability of books is an issue, Lizi reflected, since the choice stands between a book and a meal.

'The children love the books at first sight, but the parents are not going to buy it because it is not a prescribed school text.' Unable to recover the costly investment, writers tend to simply 'hawk' their books, or give them away as gifts.

Similarly to many other women writers, Lizi is very much involved in activities to promote reading and writing, especially among children and youth. She was active in the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN); she is a member of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) and a trustee of the Abuja Literary Society. Through her workplace, the National Council for Art and Culture, Lizi has been able to establish an active children's programme, and she insists that their awards include books by Nigerian authors, to encourage children to read. They have also initiated essay writing competitions to groom children's writing abilities and talents.

Vicky Sylvester and female role models

Academic teaching and writing is a common occupation among women writers, as exemplified by Professor Mnguember Vicky Sylvester, who teaches literature and gender studies at the Department of English at University of Abuja. Focusing on the forgotten and invisible writers in Nigerian literary history, Vicky interviewed Nigerian women writers for her PhD dissertation, *A Literary History of Nigerian Women Writers 1950–1990*, while her MA thesis focused on Buchi Emecheta. Her choice of topics was often questioned: why write about unknown writers like Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa, when there are better-known writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka? If anything, such reservations strengthened her resolve to focus on women writers. Vicky completed her PhD at the University of Jos in 1995, having also carried out research at SOAS in London. In 2008 she was promoted to professor and is currently working as the head of department. When she was doing her research, it was unusual to write about gender and she encountered negative prejudices. Vicky was even described as a 'frustrated spinster', which could not be further from the truth.

Similarly to other middle-aged women writers, Vicky has managed to combine her professional career with family life. She

married young and her three children are now grown-ups, in their early twenties and thirties. Vicky's now-late spouse was a retired lawyer and banker. Vicky speaks three languages: her mother tongue, Tiv, as well as Hausa and English. She was born in Gboko, Benue State, but her family moved to Jos when she was an infant. Her parents were civil servants and could afford to send her to Catholic private schools.

Vicky grew up reading children's books by British writers, since the Catholic mission school had British and Irish literature, and in secondary school she was exposed to literature and story books by British, Irish and American writers. She reflected, 'I knew more about Britain than I knew about Nigeria, because I read all of Charles Dickens's works.' The first time she went to London, she felt like she had been there all her life: 'everything was just so familiar'.

One of the reasons Vicky decided to study African literature was because she only got to read Nigerian books once she got to university. As she discovered Nigerian literature, she went out of her way to look for them and she read them 'comparatively', noting differences in cultural contexts. The absence of 'Nigerianness' or 'Africanness' in American and British literature became palpable and she did not expect that 'young people' around her would 'find themselves in those works'. She was encouraged 'to read more of our own writers'. In her search for African literature, she also found women writers, who were quite invisible in the university syllabus, yet who inspired her own storytelling. Vicky's search for literature that spoke to her own experiences is comparable with the literary scholar Safoura Salami-Boukari, who teaches African literature in the United States. In her textbook on African literature, she reflects how, as 'a women reader', reading canonical novels like *Things Fall Apart* left her 'thirsty for information about women's experiences' (Salami-Boukari 2012, 7). Similarly to Safoura, Vicky made research on women writers a priority in her own professional career.

Like many other women writers, Vicky started writing early, as of secondary school. She wrote for a local newspaper, not as a 'wordsmith' but as a 'reporter', earning some money through her writing while at the university. Her articles focused on gender

issues, her stories inspired by situations she had witnessed, especially the abuse of women. As a student and later as researcher, she wrote academic texts, while teachers in creative writing encouraged her to develop her literary skills. Over time she progressed from reporting to writing fiction.

In addition to her academic publications, Vicky has published in multiple literary genres: a play, a novel, a collection of poetry and a collection of short stories. Her debut novel *Long Shadows* (Sylvester 2015) centres on the Tiv uprising of the early 1960s. Vicky kindly gave me a copy of the novel when we first met in Kampala in July 2016, a neatly printed paperback edition with an artistic rendering of a rural landscape on the cover. The endorsements on the back cover are written by eminent writers and scholars in Nigeria:

> *Long Shadows* is a superb recreation of Tiv history at a time of crises, highlighting the internal cleavages, ethnic tensions and recriminations and colonial subjugations of a free, courageous and enterprising people. Mnguember Vicky Sylvester has written an impressive first novel.

The eloquent endorsement by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, a prolific icon and multiple award winner, adds value to the novel, as do the commendations by senior scholars in the US and Nigeria.

When I met Vicky at the children's carnival, before our interview on 4 December, she was happily welcoming the event's two international guests: me and Juliet Kushaba from Uganda, writer and member of FEMRITE, the Uganda Women Writers' Association. Vicky and Juliet knew each other well; both had attended the Ebedi Writers Residence in October to November 2015. They met again at the FEMRITE@20 event in Kampala in July 2016, which is where I first met Vicky. Juliet attended the Efuru@50 celebration, presenting a paper at the University of Abuja conference on 6 December. After the carnival, Vicky treated us to a scrumptious lunch at a golf club, a posh establishment with well-kept golf courses and a subtle atmosphere of whispering wealth.

At the Efuru@50 conference at Abuja university, Vicky presented a paper on *Efuru* in a literary history context, entitled 'Speaking with the Voice of a Woman: Efuru and Its Intertextual

Songs of Processing Generations' (Sylvester 2016). She introduced her abstract with: 'Flora Nwapa repeatedly said she wrote Efuru (1966) because Chinua Achebe wrote Things Fall Apart (1958). Since Efuru, African women have written their lives and the lives of other women voicing revolutionary potentials in their make-up.' Referring to Flora Nwapa as 'an emancipated role model', she brought forward the works of other women writers (Emecheta, Ogundipe-Leslie and Adichie) to show how their 'characters voice difficult but attainable life issues and ideals', underlining that '[t]heir liberation is bound up with the overall struggle of human society'. Acutely aware of how women's literature is often belittled as domestic, concerned with mundane everyday life instead of greater societal concerns, Vicky made sure to underscore that the 'character portraitures go beyond the sitting room, the kitchen and the other room to abiding concerns of education, national development, cosmopolitanism and globalization'.

Specialized in gender and women's literature, Vicky identifies as a feminist. Similarly to Lizi Ben-Iheanacho, she did not hesitate to say so during our interview. 'I do identify myself as a feminist, because there are certain things you talk about because they are gender-related and nobody can really talk about them in the way you would,' is how she responded to my question on feminism. She used the example of young women coming to her for advice to illustrate her feminist perspective, how she would respond to their tales of violence and harassment by encouraging their strength to control or get out of abusive situations.

As a scholar, Vicky mentors young students, developing their creative writing skills and inquisitive abilities. In so doing, she can encourage them to develop a critical feminist perspective, whether the students are female or male. Through her writing, she reaches many more people, her stories shedding light on social issues, especially from a gender perspective.

As a writer, Vicky is also involved in various literary associations that promote reading and writing. She is an engaged member of the ANA and the Abuja Literary Society, and was an adviser to an Association of Women Writers, which is no longer active. 'There you have young people coming to you with materials and say, oh please, can you read this for me, and can you talk to me

about, I want to write, but I don't know how to go about it,' she reflected, 'so all the time you are advising and encouraging and trying to inspire people by what you say and what you write.'

Similarly to Lizi and other Nigerian female writers, Vicky thus follows the social ethics of art for society's sake, using her creative talent to address pertinent social issues, while building creative talent in young people. Despite a hectic working schedule, Vicky makes time to share her talent with others, encouraging young people to express themselves through literature. Her reflections on the role of women writers capture this ethics, their role being 'educative, informative, inspirational and encouraging', serving as role models for young girls in particular.

Multitasking careers and literary mothering

By invoking Flora Nwapa, I wish to draw attention to the literary mothering of Nigerian women writers, which attests to the social ethics of creolized aesthetics. Similarly to how orature interlinks different art forms to express the interdependence of all existence (Thiong'o 2014), so does the moral imperative of the creolized aesthetic position literature in the middle of society, as a creative force for social progress. In their role as female griottes (Ogunyemi 1996), women writers emulate the griot's position as 'spokesperson for collective values', an oral tradition in which '[t]here is no art for art's sake, because the word of the griot is a lesson, a truth that restores the past while simultaneously committing society to its future' (Ouattara 2018, 165). As Lizi reflected, she does not pursue art for art's sake, but values her social and moral obligations as a storyteller, especially for future generations. Her moral orientation resonates with the social ethics of Flora Nwapa: '[n]othing belies "art for art's sake" more than Flora Nwapa's fiction for children' (Emenyonu 1998b, 605). In the Nigerian literary complex, the moral value of literature is well established. The history of literacy in the region shows that literature has enjoyed an elevated status, as 'the principal repository of civilized values' (Barber 2006, 13). From early on, book clubs were formed, their members having a pronounced 'sense of public responsibility', using their reading skills for self-improvement and societal progress (Barber 2006, 13). By comparison, in

world literature scholarship, the autonomy of literature is often upheld, an aesthetic ideal related to the claim that 'art and literature should serve no other purposes than itself', although scholars recognize that the 'intersection between ethics and aesthetics is extremely meaningful' (Helgesson and Rosendahl Thomsen 2020, 157–8). Unlike the Western aesthetic ideal of 'art for art's sake', in African art contexts the aesthetics of 'art for society's sake' is quite common (Uimonen 2012).

When it comes to Nigerian women writers, their literary mothering draws on the moral value of motherhood and mothering, which can be appreciated through the lens of African womanism. As Ogunyemi has argued, 'the Nigerian woman writer, as mother, uses her text more functionally as she zeroes in on the problems that face her constituency — the oppressed women, men, and children who must somehow survive under her care' (Ogunyemi 1996, 113). It has been argued that perceptions of motherhood have differentiated African feminists from dominant feminist theorizing (Nnaemeka 1997). While Western feminists have challenged the patriarchal institution of motherhood, African feminist scholars have underlined the cultural significance of mothering as an experience in African women's literature (Nnaemeka 1997, 5). Ogunyemi has referred to Flora Nwapa as the 'foremother' of a literary tradition that captures the 'matricentricity in Nigerian culture' (1996, 43–4). She positions women's literature in the context of the country's postcolonial healing process, emphasizing that the 'main textual ingredient is the maternal input' (Ogunyemi 1996, 102). The centrality of mothering is by no means limited to biological motherhood but encompasses different forms of *social mothering*, while emphasizing the creative and life-affirming dimensions of motherly power (Ogunyemi 1996, 60–61). Although female power is considered different from male power, both are equally important for social progress. Given the flexibility of shifting gender roles in Igbo culture, which do not necessarily coincide with biological sex (Amadiume [1987] 2015; Nzegwu 2005), my use of the term 'literary mothering' is therefore by no means limited to women.

For Nigerian women writers, their literary mothering translates into multitasking writing careers, a path pioneered by

Flora Nwapa. In addition to being a pioneer female writer and publisher, Flora Nwapa had an illustrious professional career in administration and education. She was 'a woman who combined creative writing, motherhood, business acumen, government duties, and social work' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1998, 197). In so doing, she served as a role model for women writers, showing a path of modern careerism combined with family life. Given her various obligations, her writing time was of course limited. Flora Nwapa recounted her preferences for writing in early mornings: 'I do not write at night at all, I prefer to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning, write for two or three hours and then go to work at 8 o'clock. But then I must go to bed between 8.30 and 9.30' (Flora Nwapa, cited in James 1990, 117). Contemporary Nigerian women writers also combine literary production with professional careers and social responsibilities. Their multitasking lifestyles can be strenuous, leaving little time to pursue their literary talent, but it also provides a rich source of life experiences that can inspire their writing.

Most of the women writers I encountered in Nigeria worked as university lecturers, often in literature, creative writing and/or gender studies. This is similar to the literary scene in Ireland, where '[m]any prominent writers have doctoral or master's degrees in creative writing and frequently find themselves teaching this subject' (Wulff 2017, 1). In Nigeria, writers cannot live off their writing, so teaching is often a full-time job (see also Griswold 2000). Lecturers typically hold PhD degrees, acquired at local universities, occasionally overseas. Advanced university degrees can also qualify a person for high positions in administration, as exemplified by Dr Elizabeth Ben-Iheanacho, who works as director of research and documentation at the National Council for Art and Culture, or in media and communication, as exemplified by Eugenia Abu, who worked as executive director of Programmes at the NTA.

These professional occupations are demanding full-time jobs that leave little spare time for writing. Similarly to Flora Nwapa, it is not unusual that women write late at night or early in the morning, using quiet off-hours for their creative outlet. For instance, Vicky Sylvester is an early riser who often writes at 2–3 am. If

she is waiting somewhere, or stuck in traffic, she also scribbles. Similarly, Lizi Ben-Iheanacho scribbles on bits of paper whenever 'the muse grips' her, and she also writes on Facebook, creative thoughts as well as prose (Uimonen 2019b).

Women writers are often mothers, thus combining their careers with family life. As noted by Wulff in her anthropology of Irish writers, 'it was mostly women writers who talked about their writing career in relation to family life' (Wulff 2017, 17). It is not that men do not have families, but, similarly, to other professions, men's family obligations tend not to get in the way of their careers. The middle-aged women writers I interviewed are or have been married with children, their spouses holding professional positions. In Nigeria, the roles of wife and mother are demanding, full of social expectations and cultural obligations, as featured in women's literature. Although middle-class families in Nigeria enjoy the benefits of hired domestic labour, women are still expected to be in charge of the household. This explains the odd hours for writing, a quiet time when the rest of the family is asleep.

Their professional careers point to the elite position of women writers, a creative class emanating from a privileged urban middle class, a growing social class in Africa (see also Melber 2016). Almost all women writers I have interviewed have a middle-class background, one or both of their parents having held professional positions, often as civil servants. Reflecting the middle-class emphasis on education as a sign of social status and a mode of social mobility, these women have enjoyed parental support for their educational advancement. They have also benefited from parental support for reading and writing, from the availability of books at home to encouragement to write. Whether at home or at school, they have thus grown up in cultural contexts that value and can afford literacy as well as creative talent. As writers and professionals, they belong to the small social stratum of artists and intellectuals, a creative class that is part of yet also distinct from the urban middle class.

'Writing, a lot of people consider it elitist,' Vicky reflected on the opportunities of writing, adding, 'sometimes you make some money out of it, but you can't depend on writing in Nigeria.' Once in a while she gets large orders for books, like 500 copies, but it does not happen often, typically only when teachers use

a book for academic purposes. Among challenges, Vicky noted 'not having a steady market', comparing the situation to other countries, remarking how, unlike in Western countries, people in Nigeria do not pick up books to read. The elitist status of writing is thus not about financial capital but cultural capital, writers enjoying an elevated social status thanks to their creative talent, without necessarily making any money out of it.

Although taxing, their professional careers offer women valuable skills and insights for literary production, which are often digitally mediated (see also Uimonen 2019b). Trained in research through their university education, women use their investigative skills when researching for their writing, which is often done on the Internet. For instance, Vicky Sylvester uses the Internet when researching for a book, through Google or chat, downloading relevant materials to her computer. Similarly, Eugenia Abu does research online.

Their professional careers give writers insights into various social worlds, which they can use when creating fictional plots, characters and milieus. It has been noted that dilemmas of social transformation for modern women has been a recurring topic in the works of women writers: 'symptomatic of the situation in which Nigeria women (the educated, middle-class, elite women of Nwapa's fiction, as well as those of Ifeoma Okoye's, Zaynab Alkali's, Buchi Emecheta's, Helen Ovbiagele's etc) find themselves in' (Bryce 1998, 405). Women writers thus use their literary works to reflect on their own social experiences.

The women writers I interviewed are all members of the ANA, the country's foremost association for writers. Established in 1981, the ANA is headquartered at the National Theatre Complex in Lagos, with local chapters in 30 states. The association hands out annual awards in six categories: poetry, prose, drama, literary criticism, fiction (short stories) and children's literature. Before the overhaul of prizes in 2011–13, the association had awards in 14 categories, including the Flora Nwapa Prize for Women (Creative) Writing. The ANA organizes an annual convention, along with a variety of other literary activities.[15] In addition to being members

[15] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Association_of_Nigerian_Authors, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

of the ANA, some women I interviewed are also members of the RAN, as well as literary societies, book clubs and poetry clubs.

The women writers presented in this monograph are passionate about improving reading culture in Nigeria, and they are equally committed to encouraging writing. Through various literary activities, they engage in the development of writing and promotion of reading. The sharing of skills points to an open-minded approach to literary production, emphasizing collaboration instead of competition, which is also a central tenet in womanism.

Efforts to mentor young people constitute an important aspect of literary mothering, channelling the combined experiences of creative writing and motherhood. As you may recall, when asked how many children she has, Eugenia Abu noted the many youngsters she has mentored, counting them among her offspring.

The production of children's literature is another form of literary mothering, nurturing the minds of future generations. In her diary, Flora Nwapa reflected: 'We write to leave a legacy to our children' (Umeh 2010, 92). Writing for children requires considerable skill, as the writer must be attuned to how children think and communicate. As Flora Nwapa pointed out,

> Writing for children is a serious commitment. Writing for children is not easy. It is a work that must be done with a great sense of understanding and appreciation of the world of children. It must be approached with the same excitement and enthusiasm that the child himself feels about his world which is progressively unfolding and exciting. (Nwapa 1997, 275)

When it comes to literary production in general, there is also something to say for literary mothering through books, which can be viewed as children. For instance, when asked what her favourite creative work was, Flora Nwapa responded: 'Similar to Buchi Emecheta, I too feel that books are like your children' (Flora Nwapa, cited in Umeh 1995, 25). The notion that books are like children resonates with many writers, creative as well as academic, adding yet another dimension to the norms and practices of literary mothering.

This womanist analysis of literary mothering can hopefully go some way in rectifying the neglect of women writers and children's literature in world literature studies. As Higonnet has

pointed out, one important factor in world literature canon formation has been 'the distinction between major and minor forms and the tacit segregation of folklore or children's literature from elite literary forms' (2009, 139). Rather than focusing on such structural marginalization in the world-literature system (WReC 2015), a decentred approach can help us 'rethink marginality' and 'see knowledge, power, and agency in the margins' (Nnaemeka 1997, 2). By foregrounding women's storytelling, including their stories for children, we can 'locate storytelling at the heart of knowledge construction while recognising the gender politics that often banishes storytelling to the periphery of "real knowledge"' (Nnaemeka 1997, 7). How could the norms and values transmitted to future generations be anything but real knowledge?

Although undervalued in world literature and literary history, the social significance of children's literature cannot be overstated. It is a form of aesthetic worldmaking that interlinks generations, a future-oriented genre that accommodates and extends different worlds, thus constituting a form of transition discourse by default. While literature in general offers a privileged space for exploring possible worlds, children's literature offers a very special space for rethinking the real and the possible, especially since little people have an openness for other possible worlds that is often lost in transition to adulthood.

4. Post-War Publishing in Enugu

Code switching, check points and *chi*

It took a whole day to travel from Abuja to Enugu by car, a distance of some 400 kilometres. The roads were good most of the time, as we made our way from central to south-eastern Nigeria. It was only the children of Flora Nwapa who travelled; the rest of the organizing committee were unable to make the trip, owing to lack of funding and other duties. I had planned to use the time in the car to interview the family, but I was too tired and it felt better to just let the conversation flow. We chatted about various topics, buying snacks from vendors along the way.

The landscape was incredible; thick forest, rolling hills and graceful palm trees. I was astonished by how green it was. Unlike the more arid landscape in many parts of Tanzania, Nigerian soil was fertile. There was no shortage of food, Uzoma assured me, although most agricultural production was small scale. Nigeria had started to export cassava to the United States, he told me. There is growing demand for gluten-free flour and cassava is naturally gluten free. 'Is it exported as processed flour?' I asked. No, only half processed, although, if it could be processed in Nigeria, earnings would easily triple or quadruple. So typical: Africa selling raw materials that are in high demand, yet owing to the underdeveloped industrial sector most of the value added is reaped by Western importers. Even so, food processing held potential.

We passed the confluence of Niger and Benin rivers, so wide that it looked more like a lake than the meeting of two rivers. The water was brownish, like the colour of the earth, flowing majestically. The river sides were lined with trees and bushes, with

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occasional houses. Fish seemed abundant, caught with nets, a traditional method that is gentle on the environment.

We were in Igboland, and a new language was spoken. Not that I had come close to hearing the difference between Nigeria's largest languages, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Hausa confounded me since some of the words resembled Swahili, both drawing on Arabic. Once, at the university guesthouse in Maiduguri, I had even thought that the drivers I overheard in the parking lot were from East Africa, as I could hear some Swahili-sounding words. But it was Hausa. Most of the time I simply tuned out when people spoke in local languages. Meanwhile, I thoroughly enjoyed that English was spoken so much of the time, by most people I encountered. Some had heavy accents, and, unless I articulated words very clearly, they would not immediately understand me, and vice versa. But most of the time, communication flowed easily.

Code switching was common, people alternating between different languages. Scholars have written extensively about code switching, a common practice in many multilingual contexts. In Nigeria, people often spoke English, but from time to time they would throw in words or expressions in another language, or speak in another language, then switching back to English. There were plenty of police check points along the road and I noticed that Uzoma spoke pidgin to the officers. 'Well done!' was a common greeting. For a while I got my hopes up, perhaps I could learn pidgin, which was a lingua franca spoken all over the country. But then I realized that it was a language often used by police and military, which deterred me.

The numerous police checkpoints slowed down our travel. Usually we had to stop the car and the officers expected some money, some even asked for it. Uzoma kept some small change in the car, handing it out whenever needed, which was most of the time. Traffic police are notoriously corrupt, a well-known phenomenon not just in Nigeria but in various parts of the continent. I was quite used to it from Tanzania, but in Nigeria it seemed more blatant. The traffic police did not even pretend to look for faults with the car, nor were they equipped with cameras to catch speeding vehicles. Here they just stopped the car and asked for money. Straightforward. Some checkpoints had concrete blocks

as security measures, but it was unclear what kind of security the police enforced, since they only seemed to check passing cars to get some money. I had been warned of the checkpoints by my taxi driver before leaving Abuja. 'Depends on how many checkpoints there are,' he replied when I asked how long the trip would take.

As we came closer to Enugu, passing through some very rural areas, the earth turned a deep reddish brown. I love that colour, its warmth! I excitedly took photos of houses that we passed through the car window, small houses made of brick or clay, warmly reddish brown. Trying to imagine what kind of lives people lived in these villages.

'What is *chi*?' I asked. It was a recurring word in *Efuru*, and I had understood it to be a religious/spiritual phenomenon of sorts. Efuru was always advised to follow her chi, and when things were not going well in her life it was said that her *chi* was perhaps upset and needed to be appeased. 'It is your personal god,' Ejine responded, clarifying: 'the god manifested within you.' A personal god? I was intrigued. Months later I learned more about Igbo cosmology, especially through Jell-Bahlsen's detailed ethnography.

Enugu turned out to be a neat city, seemingly orderly, with no traffic jams and more consistent power supply. It is the state capital of Enugu State, formerly the capital of the Eastern Region. Enugu was also declared the capital of the Republic of Biafra during the war, thus known as the capital of Igboland. With a population approaching a million people, Enugu is a vibrant centre in the south-east, often featured in Flora Nwapa's literature. Flora Nwapa lived and worked in Enugu for several years, and her eldest daughter, Ejine, was born here, when Flora Nwapa was teaching at Queen's School Enugu.

In trying to work out when the family had lived in Enugu, Ejine used the war as a reference. Born in 1969, Uzoma had been born during the war, while Amede had been born after the war, in 1971. Nwapa had married the industrialist Gogo Nwakuche in 1967, and during the war the family had sought refuge in Oguta; after the war they lived in Enugu.

I updated myself about the war through Wikipedia that evening and posted the following on my Facebook page on 7 December 2016:

> Have now arrived in Enugu, Igboland. In 1975 Flora Nwapa published the novel 'Never Again' about the Biafran War (1967–1970). The war is also the subject of Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun. It is estimated that up to 2 million Biafran civilians died of starvation (war strategy by Nigerian military) during the war. Tanzania was one of the few countries in Africa that recognized Biafra. Map of the Republic of Biafra in June 1967: [image of map].

As a child, I had heard about Biafra, a word that conjured images of starving children. In Sweden and other Western countries, media reporting on the war made an impact on popular understandings of war, poverty and starvation in Africa. It was an image of Africa in humanitarian crisis that has stuck in many minds. In Sweden, a new expression was coined, *Biafrabarn* (Biafra children), used to denote undernourished children with swollen bellies. Later in life, I read Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie 2006), but the book had faded in my memory by the time I arrived in Nigeria. During Efuru@50 I learned that memories of the war were still very much alive, particularly among Igbo people who had lived through it.

'This is the best hotel I have stayed in so far!' I happily exclaimed to Amede when she came to see if I was ok in my room. We had checked into a mid-range hotel, which had all the comforts I could ask for. The room was spacious, clean and well maintained. The walls were painted in a bright lime-green colour, the window covered with heavy yellow curtains matching the yellow bedspread. The bed even had some decorative cushions, with golden printed covers. The bathroom was tiled from floor to ceiling. The white wall tiles were patterned with curvy lines, complemented by a decorative line in black with white wavy lines. There was even a bathtub and a shower with two shower heads, a tall round one and a handheld one.

While Uzoma, Ejine and Amede had a meeting in the lobby, I went for dinner in the hotel restaurant. They met with Prince Paschal Mebuge, the chair of the local organizing committee, and some friends to complete preparations for the event the next day. They sat on large upholstered sofas and armchairs around a low table, taking excitedly about the event. After inquiring in the bar, I found the restaurant upstairs. I was the only guest in a large,

deserted dining room. Having eaten Nigerian food for the last few days, I ordered a club sandwich. It took almost an hour for the kitchen to prepare it, so I used the time to write some notes.

The following morning we prepared the car as usual, packing the open back of the pickup with books and event bags. For safety, all materials had been removed from the car and kept in the hotel room overnight. It was an arduous routine, but spirits were high. When we travelled, our suitcases were also stored at the back of the pickup. Both Ejine and Amede had large heavy suitcases, filled with different gowns, a new one for each event. Amede wore her own design every day and so did Ejine. Amédé, as her design was known, combined the latest in international fashion with fabrics of locally made hand-dyed chiffon, beautiful creations that flattered the figure. Both women wore high heels, but, when travelling to the venues, they wore flat shoes in the car, which they changed upon arrival. Looking good is clearly a highly valued aspect of Nigerian femininity, far more important than comfort.

Unveiling Efuru@50 and awarding the First Daughter

We arrived early at the venue, the International Conference Centre of the Institute of Management and Technology. We parked the car in the large parking lot and the bags of books in the trunk were carried to the lobby, where Amede and Ejine prepared a table with books and event bags on display. They covered the table with a large white tablecloth, before carefully arranging the books in a visually pleasing display: stacks of books propping up the various titles and the *Efuru* 50th anniversary edition prominently exposed. Some two dozen event bags were lined up next to the books, gifts for selected guests and awards for students.

There was an art exhibition in the spacious lobby, the 10th anniversary of the Life in My City art festival, as announced on a large colourful banner hanging over the entrance. I slowly meandered through the spacious lobby and adjoining side rooms, all filled with marvellous artworks. Large paintings hung on the walls, oil or acrylic on canvas, along with some textile wall hangings. I was mesmerized by a tall sculpture on one of the walls, a life-size woman with children, ingeniously made from plastic

bottle caps in different colours. Some of the paintings used multiple materials, an oil painting of a woman wearing a long skirt made of textile, a painting of men digging garbage with newspaper articles pasted as background and some scrunched-up cans, and a black and white abstract of a foetus with strings of red yarn, collected onto a white fabric on the floor. Sculptures were also displayed on tables and stands: a bronze sculpture of a woman cooking food in a large pot on stones, a wooden tray that spilled red stones into a woven basket, and abstract wooden heads placed on glass bottles sitting on wooden stands. The creative talent on display was truly remarkable.

The auditorium was splendid, with a wide entrance from the back of the lobby leading upwards into a grandiose hall. Rows and rows of comfortable seats with black backs, red cushions and armrests lined the gently slanting auditorium, with a seating capacity of some 700 people. On top of the auditorium was a small platform with more artwork on display. The elevated front stage was spacious, with a shiny floor of white tiles. A dozen armchairs, large loungers in white faux leather, were lined up against the back wall, the customary high table. At the front of the stage was a tall white podium. The MC, a young male professional, smartly dressed in black jeans and a black shirt under his grey suit jacket, kicked off the event by inviting dignitaries to the armchairs on stage, while announcing the presence of other esteemed guests with the words 'I want to recognize', followed by title (Professor, Doctor, Engineer, Mr, Mrs), name, position and institute, adding a few witty yet respectful remarks. To my surprise, the MC recognized my presence with the words 'white person/woman', to which everyone laughed. It was the first time my whiteness was said out loud in the Efuru@50 celebrations and Ejine and Amede looked at me somewhat alarmed. I smiled at them reassuringly, showing that I had not been offended. After all, I was used to being the whitey.

Shortly after the programme started, the auditorium filled up to the last seat, over 700 people in total. The majority were students, but there was also a high number of dignitaries, as well as relatives and friends of the family. Even the patriarch of the Flora Nwapa family, Chief Christopher Nwapa, a distinguished gentleman, attended the event.

After opening and welcoming remarks by the vice-chancellor, the guest of honour arrived, none less than the deputy governor of Enugu State, the Honorable Mrs Cecilia Ezeilo. The dignitaries from the stage stepped outside to greet her at the car by the side entrance, where she arrived with armed guards, including a female uniformed bodyguard who stayed by her side throughout her attendance. After she took her seat on the stage, along with the other dignitaries and Flora Nwapa's children, it was time for an Igbo welcoming ritual. A kola nut was broken and offered on a tray to all high-level guests on stage.

The Honorable Cecilia Ezeilo addressed the audience from the podium with an eloquent tribute to Flora Nwapa, who 'opened the horizon for women to start thriving through personal efforts and dedication'. She was 'sentimentally thrilled' to recall that 'this world-renowned professor worked as an educational instructor in one of our prestigious schools, the Queen's High School Enugu'. She emphasized that she aligned herself with the celebration of this icon, 'not because she was a literary icon' and 'not because she achieved world fame' but because the benefits women were reaping today could be traced to the inspiration from Professor Flora Nwapa. She cited Flora Nwapa's statements on writing a positive picture of women and her encouragement to women to survive in a world dominated by men. She reiterated her support for the celebration, while giving Flora Nwapa her accolade, albeit posthumously, 'because her books inspired me as a young student in my youthful days'. She concluded by citing the legendary Jorge Luis Borges: 'When writers die they become books, which is, after all, not too bad an incarnation.' Waiting for the applause to subside, she added with tears in her eyes, 'Professor Flora Nwapa leaves a not too bad an incarnation so let us celebrate her. Thank you and God bless you!'

An unveiling ceremony followed the deputy governor's heartfelt words, a ritualized homage to the immortalized Flora Nwapa and one of her incarnations, *Efuru*. All dignitaries from the stage stepped down to the floor, where a table had been prepared, decorated with white tablecloth, holding stacks of *Efuru*, covered in white cloth. To capture the moment, I had positioned myself on the steps in front of the table, together with a handful of

Figure 6. Unveiling *Efuru*. Photograph by author.

photographers and television crew, as I alternated between filming and taking photographs.

'We have reached the great moment and that's the unveiling of *Efuru*, after 50 years of its first publication,' Cecilia Ezeilo announced, with a microphone in her hand. Turning to her left, where Uzoma, Ejine and Amede were standing, she said, 'I can't thank the family members enough.' She then turned to her right. 'I can't thank the organizers enough.' She looked straight ahead, adding, 'And to the women here, she's a good role model; we should all of us here use her as our mentor.' She then moved forward, lifting the edge of the tablecloth: 'In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, I unveil this, to the glory of God'. The men on her right and Ejine helped her lift the cloth, as she continued: 'To the movement of Nigeria and then to increase our reading value.' She lifted a copy of *Efuru*, turning it in all directions, while everyone applauded. Group photographs were taken, the smiling dignitaries lined up behind the table. Then the national anthem was played and everyone was standing erect, some placing their hands on their hearts, while many sang along,

including the deputy governor and the children of Flora Nwapa, with Ejine's clear voice rising through the collective singing.

The unveiling ceremony framed the event politically, reflecting women writers' contributions to national development, while affirming Flora Nwapa's fame as a role model for women. Although a highly politicized ritual, the deputy governor's personal praise and emotional enunciations ascertained a feminine touch to the expression of patriotism, while her religious discourse positioned the nation in a larger imagined community, in a universe of human and spiritual coexistence. The ritual of patriotism was thus culturally framed within the encompassing frame of femininity and spirituality. As for the expansion of her cultural influence, by emphasizing Flora Nwapa as a role model for women, and her continued presence through her literary incarnations, Flora Nwapa's fame was expanded into feminine eternity.

After an inspiring poetry performance in Igbo, it was time for the keynote, delivered by Professor Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo. 'If you love your mother, I want you to show her some love!' the MC announced when introducing Professor Ezeigbo, the audience applauding while she approached the podium, to the cheerful tunes of 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas' blasting from the loudspeakers. On her website, Professor Ezeigbo describes herself as a lecturer, writer, novelist, critic, essayist, journalist and administrator.[16] Having taught at University of Lagos for many years, she relocated to Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, Ebonyi State, in south-east Nigeria, in 2015. Well known to the audience at Efuru@50, and highly respected by the family, Professor Ezeigbo has also published literary analyses of Flora Nwapa's work. Before reading her keynote address, Ezeigbo greeted the audience, encouraging them to repeat some phrases after her, ending with 'I am Igbo, I am proud'. She then explained that the 'great Flora Nwapa' they were celebrating was a 'wonderful, strong woman' and 'a true Igbo woman', adding, 'we're very proud of her'. She recalled being introduced to Flora Nwapa through a mutual friend and how she became friends with her as well, noting that 'she was a very kind-hearted woman'.

[16] http://akachiezeigbo.org, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

Akachi Ezeigbo contextualized Flora Nwapa's work in relation to traditional society, where women were great storytellers. When the Europeans came, they introduced Western education, which was first made available to men. Women were marginalized and it was mostly men who got university education, 'and that was why, initially, most writers in Africa were men'. She recounted names like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. 'But when Flora came, the story changed,' she noted with a smile, while putting on her reading glasses. She recounted Flora Nwapa's background, underlining that she was a 'pathfinder', 'trailblazer' and 'glass ceiling crusher', while emphasizing her privileged 'family and educational background', accentuating her quality education in the most prestigious schools at the time, in Nigeria and later in Europe. She analysed Nwapa's pioneering role in literary production, mentioning other Nigerian women writers since that time, from Buchi Emecheta and Zaynab Alkali to Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

> When Flora Nwapa published her trailblazing novel *Efuru* the battle to describe the African woman in fiction and balance the gender equation began in earnest. She was the first Nigerian writer to give women characters positive and significant roles in literature. […]
>
> In telling Efuru's story, Nwapa subverts the stereotypical portrayal of women by male writers. Throughout the novel, Efuru displays her prowess as an astute businesswoman, a responsible member of community who helps others readily, a faithful and devoted wife as well as a reliable friend and ardent worshipper of Uhamiri, the local deity.
>
> Ajanupu, one of the women characters in the novel, calls her 'a woman among women.' And that is what I call Flora Nwapa, *a woman among women*. [applause]

The cultural framing of Flora Nwapa as a *woman among women* ascertained the encompassing frame of femininity, while Efuru's worship of *Uhamiri* deepened the spiritual framing of the event. Similarly to other tributes at Efuru@50, the character Efuru was praised as if she had been a living character, a woman who embodied cultural ideals. By using the praise of Efuru in the novel to characterize the author herself, as a woman among women,

Ezeigbo cast both as role models, thus affirming the values of femininity. In terms of spirituality, by highlighting Efuru as an ardent worshipper of Uhamiri, Ezeigbo centred the spiritual framing of the event on the female deity that also served as Flora Nwapa's muse. Ezeigbo's authority as a renowned Igbo scholar validated the expansion of Flora Nwapa's fame, articulating the centrality of femininity and spirituality from a historical and cultural perspective. Welcomed as a mother, Ezeigbo herself embodied the value placed on motherhood in this cultural context.

An Igbo women's organization then gave a posthumous First Daughter Award to Flora Nwapa, a ritual that evoked the 'mothering/daughtering ideology' of African womanism (Ogunyemi 1996, 102). Flora Nwapa's daughter Ejine received the award on her late mother's behalf in an elaborate ceremony. Ten women entered the stage, all dressed in red gowns, with the emblems UMUADA IGBO NIGERIA printed in yellow on their skirts and tops and the same printed fabric wrapped on their heads. The spokeswoman of the First Daughters (*Umuada*) of Enugu State recounted Flora Nwapa's many achievements, reading from sheets of paper in her hand, the microphone in the other hand. The other women were standing in a line behind her, listening attentively, one of them taking pictures with her mobile phone. Ejine was called to the stage and, while seated on a chair, she was given the award and a placard, as well as a red beaded banner hung around her neck, with the words NWADA IGBO GARA UZO OMA in yellow. Visibly touched, Ejine used carefully selected words and expressions in Igbo to thank the women's society for the award, the audience responding with loud cheers and applause. The award, Nwada Igbo Gara Uzo Oma, was later translated to me by Ejine as a First Daughter of Igbo Land Who Travelled on a Good Journey, a lifetime award that immortalized Flora Nwapa's achievements as an Igbo woman, now elevated to First Daughter, thus anchoring her fame in Igbo women's cultural context.

The programme continued with poetry recitals, dramatizations and a student quiz. Many of the poems were written for the occasion, tributes to Flora Nwapa and Efuru, with titles like *Virtuous Woman* and *The Inner Strength of a Strong Woman*. Elaborate costumes and props were used in a dramatization of *Efuru*, thus

paying tribute to traditional Igbo culture, while reinterpreting the story for the 50th anniversary, for example a daughter winning an award to study in the US. Some drinks and snacks were served, including an alcohol-free malt drink that seemed a popular beverage during festive occasions, as well as garden eggs and groundnuts. For the student quiz, students in school uniforms, most of them female, sat on two rows near the stage, the judges at a table nearby. Uzoma handed out event bags with books to the winners.

Suddenly the stage turned into a catwalk for a fashion show, to the soundtrack of popular music. Female and male students trotted down the stage in rhythm with the music, solemnly staring straight ahead, stopping a few times to pose for the audience. Showing off youthful designs, the female models femininely swung their hips, confidently balancing on their high heels, while the male models walked with a masculine swagger. Amede was delighted.

Before the programme ended, a minute of silence was declared, to honour the funeral of Dr Wale Okediran's wife. The prayer was timed with the burial of Wale's wife in London, who had passed on a few days earlier. Wale had left Abuja abruptly on the day of the children's carnival, after receiving alarming news from London. By the time he changed planes in Cairo, he was informed that his wife had passed on. Most of us had no idea that his wife had been critically ill and we were all saddened by the news. Having played a key role in the Efuru@50 preparations, Wale regretted not being able to see the event to its conclusion, but he called us regularly from London, inquiring how everything was going.

The programme drew to a close in the late afternoon, much to the dismay of the scholars who had come to present their papers. The politically significant attendance of the deputy governor had delayed the programme, and at 16:30 there was no time left for paper presentations. The scholars were quite upset; some had already left in anger. One scholar approached me to inquire what to do about her paper. I assured her that all papers would be published in the conference proceedings; at least, that was what the organizers had planned.

As we stepped outside the venue, students flocked to have their picture taken. Amede was treated like a celebrity, a fashion

designer who clearly served as a source of inspiration. She was interviewed by several students, one of them reading questions off a notebook, the others recording and taking pictures on their mobile phones. I photographed the interview and caught Amede at an angle where she reminded me of Tyra Banks, with her long, thin braids framing her beautiful features. When I shared some pictures with Amede later in the evening, she was delighted by my Tyra Banks comparison and burst out in a joyful giggle.

Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* and women's war stories

Flora Nwapa had first-hand experience of the Nigerian Civil War and its aftermath, and she also wrote about it in the novel *Never Again* (Nwapa [1975] 1986) and several short stories in the collections *Wives at War* (Nwapa [1980] 1984) and *This Is Lagos* (Nwapa [1971] 1986). With *Never Again*, Nwapa reached yet 'another landmark in Nigerian women's writing', namely 'the first war narrative written by an African woman' (Ogunyemi 1996, 164). In her thorough analysis of Nwapa's war writings, Ezeigbo (1998b, 483–5) has underlined that the most prominent theme was *survival*, especially women's survival strategies, in a war that was cast as needless and futile. Rather than aggrandizing war, Nwapa articulated a critical perspective on war as 'destructive and dehumanizing', something 'bizarre and tragic, without heroes or heroines', bringing out 'the worst forms of sadism, selfishness, hypocrisy, and dishonesty in people' (Ezeigbo 1998b, 492). Nwapa thus engaged in a revisionary process of telling the stories of war from women's perspective, which set her apart from male authors (Ezeigbo 1998b, 477–8). As you may recall from Chapter 1, Eugenia Abu suggested that women writers are better able to express 'the pain of war' because they are left to carry the burdens of war, a literary claim that is corroborated by Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worlding of the civil war.

In *Never Again* (Nwapa [1975] 1986), the Biafran War is told through the eyes of the woman Kate, whose first-person narrative covers a wide range of issues, from international and national politics to community and family relations. Ogunyemi notes that it is the first time Nwapa writes 'the self into the text', using 'I', which she interprets as the author's 'maternal' purpose: 'to teach the

pernicious nature of war in order to save rather than destroy lives' (1996, 165). Influenced by her own experiences, *Never Again* focuses on 'women as mothers in a society devastated by war', including 'Uhamiri, the mother of all' (Ogunyemi 1996, 165–7).

The story starts with how Kate and her husband, Chudi, have fled from Port Harcourt, as Nigerian troops have taken over the town. They have taken refuge with their children in their hometown, Ugwuta (Oguta), where their parents and other relatives are still enjoying peace. Having experienced the fall of Port Harcourt, Kate is worried, sensing that Ugwuta is also under imminent threat, but saying so brands her as a saboteur. Rumours and false news abound, as political and military representatives of the Biafran side try to keep up morale by withholding advances by Nigerian troops, while maintaining pretences of strength, even victory. Far from buying into the propaganda, Kate remains sceptical of local elites and intellectuals.

International geopolitics is woven into the narrative, along with international newscasts. Kate and her family listen to BBC radio for news about the war, although it is not the most reliable source and some accuse the BBC of simply lying. More significantly, foreign intervention in the civil war is brought up from the outset. A pro-Biafran fanatic who later becomes a military officer, rapidly ascending to major, shares the 'good news' of Biafran troops having 'received sophisticated weapons from Europe', from a 'top secret' donor (Nwapa [1975] 1986, 3). Meanwhile, the realities of powerful alliances are made known, as one of 'the elites' suggests: 'The war would have ended long ago but for the British, who are supplying arms to Nigeria. If it had been between us and Nigeria, the war would have ended years ago' (Nwapa 1986, 17). When Kate expresses scepticism about compulsory training for all able-bodied men, noting the lack of arms and ammunition that rendered them unable to fight, 'an intellectual' angrily responds: 'We are going to defend our fatherland, all right? Look at Vietnam. They have been at war for the past thirty-five years. Thirty-five years, and they are still fighting. […] Still fighting to free their fatherland from American imperialism' (Nwapa 1986, 24).

Using Oguta as a 'microcosm of Biafra', Ezeigbo has noted that, 'by being truly local, her vision attains universal applicability'

(Ezeigbo 1998b, 482), which points to the creolized aesthetics of Flora Nwapa's literary worldmaking. Just like the war in Biafra is a conflict between different layers of power, from the local elite to national and international agents of political and military power, so is the cultural orientation of the novel's main character, Kate, who listens to BBC radio, prays to God and acknowledges the Goddess of the Lake. Through Kate's scepticism, the local is problematized as place of belonging as well as a disputed site of power, as exemplified by how local beliefs are both maintained through and dislodged from social relations. The messiness of the war cuts through the narrative, unravelling a reality where survival is intricately entangled with human, natural and spiritual dimensions of social life. Yet, in this war story, the local social world and its spiritual world supersede the political economy of the postcolonial world order, its military power notwithstanding.

Kate remains sceptical and pragmatic throughout the turmoil of war, focusing on the well-being and safety of her family, while reflecting on the evils of war. She attends to her family and in-laws, and, when the time comes to escape from Oguta, she busies herself preparing food for her children and the means to secure their food in their place of refuge. 'Hunger was paramount in my thoughts. Hunger. I have never known hunger all my life. Now I was going to be faced with hunger. My children would be faced with hunger' (Nwapa 1986, 50). Since there was no room in their car for yams, Kate packed some uncut wrappers that she could sell to buy food. Nwapa thus showed how women carried on their roles as 'providers, nurturers, and caretakers' (Ezeigbo 1998b, 483), that is, their maternal roles (Ogunyemi 1996).

It was upon leaving Oguta that Kate saw her first dead person, symbolically a pregnant woman (Nwapa 1986, 58). The woman had started labour when she suddenly dropped dead. As Nwapa narrates her children's reactions, the pain of the death is brought home: 'At first they did not understand. It was the eldest who first realised what had happened. She threw herself on the ground and yelled and yelled' (Nwapa 1986, 58). Through Kate's reflection, the deadly outcome of war is spelled out: 'That was the first dead body I saw during the war. The woman who had spoken a few minutes ago was a corpse. Was death so quick? Was it as quick as

it was cruel? What was the cause of death?' Ezeigbo has suggested that the death of the pregnant women who is about to deliver her baby 'symbolizes the demise of the new nation, Biafra, which is destined not to survive' (1998b, 494, fn 9). Ogunyemi makes a similar analysis, postulating that the death alludes to 'the waste of Nigeria's human and material potential, especially the death of the newborn nation, Biafra, an extension or replica of Nigeria' (Ogunyemi 1995, 8). But this scene of death, where the dying mother calls out to her own mother, who has already joined the ancestors, while lamenting the absence of her husband, can also be interpreted as 'the people's spiritual death' and, as the story unfolds, 'a new beginning' (Ogunyemi 1996, 168).

Indicative of her womanist worldmaking, Nwapa's women characters are not mere victims; some also assist with the war effort, even propagating the war. Through the woman politician, Madam Agafa, the reader is introduced to the lies and propaganda of warmongering women. At a meeting in the school hall, Kate notes the presence of some 'old politicians', asserting, 'I did not like them. To my way of thinking they caused the war. And they were now in the forefront again directing the war. The women especially were very active, more active than the men in fact' (Nwapa 1986, 7). Nwapa mentions some of the tasks these women carried out: making uniforms for the soldiers, cooking for them, giving expensive presents to the officers, and organizing women to pray for Biafra every Wednesday. 'In return for these services,' Kate notes cynically, 'they were rewarded with special war reports exclusive to them and them alone.'

Meanwhile, as the war tears apart the community, Nwapa focuses on the family, especially mothers, thus asserting 'woman's role in society as central and maternal, not in the narrow sense but in a universal role to ensure order' (Ogunyemi 1996, 167). Suspicion abounds and any utterance of scepticism is met with accusations of treason, sometimes even punished with death. When she discusses the sound of shelling with her mother, suggesting that the Nigerian troops are near, her mother warns her to be careful with what she says: 'You are not the most sensible person in Ugwuta today' (Nwapa 1986, 26). Kate realizes that even her mother has been affected by the propaganda, which leaves

her feeling quite helpless: 'If my own mother handed me over to the Army, then the world had come to an end' (Nwapa 1986, 27). Ogunyemi argues that the use of mother in this passage has a 'double meaning', referring to 'her biological mother or her spiritual mother Uhamiri', as Kate fears that 'these mothers will not or cannot perform their maternal functions-to protect, guide, and guard their people' (Ogunyemi 1996, 167).

When the family escapes their hometown, all of them squeezed into a small car, and Oguta is left 'desolate and empty', Nwapa spells out the horrors of war through Kate's reflection on how cruelty, death and immorality severe social relations (Nwapa 1986, 73):

> Where was everybody? What folly! What arrogance, what stupidity led to this war, to this death? When this cruel war was over, there will be no more war. It will not happen again, never again. NEVER AGAIN, never again.
>
> Why, we were all brothers, we were all colleagues, all friends, all contemporaries, then, without warning, they began to shoot, without warning, they began to plunder and to loot and to rape and to desecrate and more, to lie, to lie against one another. What was secret was proclaimed on the house tops. What was holy was desecrated and abused. NEVER AGAIN.

'What was holy was desecrated and abused. NEVER AGAIN' brings forth the spiritual dimension of war, as the fate of Oguta is intertwined with the Lake Goddess (Nwapa 1986, 73). Nwapa's novel even carries the dedication 'For the mysterious and beautiful…Uhamiri', thus accentuating femininity and spirituality in the telling of war stories. At the beginning of the war, people sacrifice a white ram to the Lake Goddess, and throughout the novel Kate and other members of the community place their hopes on the Woman of the Lake. As the people of Oguta finally have to leave, the Lake Goddess is implored:

> I sat down near the road. People were passing. Children were crying: Women were crying: 'Uhamiri, why have you treated us this way? The Woman of the Lake, the thunderer, the hairy woman. The most beautiful woman in the world. The ageless woman. Why, why have you done this to your children? Did we not sacrifice

> to you? Did we not keep holy your holy day? Did we not worship you with our whole heart? Why have you brought this death on us?' (Nwapa 1986, 56)

As Kate and her husband return to Oguta, they stand gazing at the lake, the only undisturbed place in a desolate environment marked by the battle of war, surrounded by burned houses, emptied barns, bullet holes and mass graves. All this destruction after a battle that only lasted 10 hours. Yet the novel ends by showing that the life-giving powers of the Goddess of the Lake are greater than the destructive power of war (Nwapa 1986, 84):

> The only thing that stood undisturbed, unmolested, dignified and solid was the Lake. The Lake owned by the great Woman of the Lake. It deified war. It was calm, pure, peaceful and ageless. It sparkled in the sunlight, turning now blue, now green as the sun shone on it.
>
> My husband and I stood gazing at it. Far in the distance was the gun-boat, sunk as the people thought not by artillery fire but by the Woman of the Lake. She in her depth sank it with her huge fan, for daring to disturb her peace with her people. She sank it for daring to carry war to her own beloved people.
>
> Uhamiri heard the pleadings of her people. She did not turn a deaf ear. She heard them. And she had acted according to the belief of the people. No invader coming by water had ever succeeded in Ugwuta. Uhamiri was the people's hope and strength. Uhamiri be praised.

Nwapa ends her war story with the restoration of the social world, paying due homage to its guardian spiritual power in her closing words (Nwapa 1986, 83):

> We turned our back to the Lake, and made for home. On our way home we met women, middle aged women in white. There was a little boy who dragged an unwilling white ram behind them. They were Uhamiri worshippers. They were going to the shrine of the Great Spirit to sacrifice to her for delivering them from the furies of the Vandals.

Never Again signals an important progression in Flora Nwapa's womanist worldmaking, embracing the sacred powers of the Lake Goddess as a source of healing, while addressing patriarchal

warmongering as well as religious wars. Ogunyemi has underlined that, while Nwapa emphasized 'the central role of women as mothers in a society devastated by war, a patriarchal preoccupation', she also used war to 'demonstrate the mutual dependency of the sexes' (Ogunyemi 1996, 165). Addressing patriarchal relations in a more holistic fashion, she discusses the 'religious war that serves as a subtext', namely between the patriarchal father, the Christian God, and the divine mother, Uhamiri (Ogunyemi 1996, 166). These sacred dimensions of human existence are embodied in the natural environment. As Ezeigbo notes, while 'the abomination in the land alienates the powerful and ubiquitous "Woman of the Lake"', suggesting a 'confusion in codes of religion', Nwapa's concluding description of the calm, peaceful and ageless lake 'seems to symbolize that the evils human beings visit upon one another are not allowed to taint or unbalance nature or the powers that control nature' (Ezeigbo 1998b, 492). Indeed, while this confusion in religious codes is evident in the 'spiritual war between the Ugwuta people and their mother Uhamiri', it is through Uhamiri, the divine mother, that 'salvation finally comes' (Ogunyemi 1996, 166).

The resurrection of Uhamiri is highly significant, conveying a relational ontology of human, environmental and spiritual interconnectedness, while insisting on peaceful coexistence and gender complementarity. Ogunyemi underlines that Flora Nwapa's war narrative is 'both therapeutic and womanist' (Ogunyemi 1996, 167), which makes the author comes across as a literary foremother to what has later been described as 'womanist methods, which 'seek to heal wounds and imbalances' in three relationships: the relationships between people from different groups, between people and the environment, and between people and the spiritual realms (Phillips 2006, xxvi). By invoking Uhamiri, Flora Nwapa engages with sacred powers to reconcile all these relationships and to heal the wounds of war. She brings forth Uhamiri to show 'the firmness, strength, order, and mystical power in a world controlled by a female deity', as a peaceful alternative to 'the disorder of a patriarchal society that thrives on the subjugation of people and controlled by the impotent, male, Christian God' (Ogunyemi 1996, 169). In so doing, Nwapa expresses her 'womanist vision' of how 'female power for good becomes openly acknowledged by

men and women' (Ogunyemi 1996, 169). Through her aesthetic worldmaking Flora Nwapa thus engages in literary peacemaking, while invoking sacred powers to heal the wounds of war and to restore balance in social and natural worlds.

Tana Press and Nwapa's post-war publishing

After the civil war, Flora Nwapa recreated herself as a publisher. Before the war she had served as assistant registrar at the University of Lagos; after the war she was appointed commissioner of health and social welfare for the Executive Council of East Central State in 1970, and one of her tasks was to reunite children who had been displaced during the war (Umeh 1998a, 674–5). After this position she was politically appointed as commissioner of lands survey and urban development in 1971 and then commissioner of establishment in 1974, both in East Central State. When General Yakubu Gowon's regime came to an end in a military coup in 1975, so did Nwapa's political appointment. Having lost her job, Nwapa recollected, 'Overnight I became once more an ordinary housewife' but 'found it difficult to write at home or to combine wifely duties with writing' and realized she 'needed a job' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1998, 193). The book industry seemed a viable business option, while offering more opportunities for literary mothering, not least by creating a platform for women writers and children's literature.

Flora Nwapa started running her publishing companies, Tana Press Limited and Flora Nwapa Books & Company in Enugu in 1977 (Umeh 2010, 106). Through commercial printing for local companies, using state-of-the-art German equipment, Nwapa ensured a steady income. She also worked with a network of professional editors to publish literature. In addition to her children's books, she published some of her own novels, short stories and plays, along with works of upcoming writers, mostly women writers, as well as well-known women writers like Ama Ata Aidoo. In total, her company published some 25 titles (Umeh 1998b, 11). Flora Nwapa also played an active role in distributing, promoting and selling books at various book fairs around the world, while

her literary transnational network helped promote Tana Press books throughout Africa, America and Europe (Umeh 2010, 115).

Through Tana Press, Flora Nwapa could break through some of the structural challenges she faced as an African woman writer. As discussed in Chapter 2, the canonical African Writers Series was dominated by male writers and editors. Although Heinemann published her first two novels, they regarded her as a 'minor writer', a 'Third World writer', and therefore 'did not bother to print and distribute her books locally and internationally when they were in demand' (Umeh 1995, 22). At the time, the publishing industry in Nigeria was dominated by international publishers Heinemann, Longman and Macmillan, which according to Flora Nwapa seemed to resent and feel threatened by her small publishing venture (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1998, 195). Indeed, until the structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, international publishers were making handsome profits from the lucrative African market (Currey 2008, 296; see also Davis 2013). As a female African writer and publisher, Nwapa thus had to break through masculinist as well as imperialist power structures. In so doing, she set up a small press of her own, thus building on the practice of artisanal presses, following the 'do-it-yourself ethos' that has characterized literary development in Nigeria (Barber 2006, 16).

Government policies and market limitations compounded the structural challenges of publishing. Children and adolescents would primarily read books listed in the school system, which meant that publishers had to lobby ministries to have their books recognized. To a large extent, this is still the case, as noted by Lizi in the previous chapter. Indeed, the publishing industry in Africa continues to be dominated by educational textbooks, while literature remains a high-risk low-gain venture (Kamau and Mitambo 2016). Even so, over the years numerous women have ventured into publishing (e.g. Jay and Kelly 2002), and publishing in Nigeria has seen something of an upswing since the early 2000s (Suhr-Sytsma 2018).

Despite the various challenges she faced, Flora Nwapa proved to be a successful publisher, her entrepreneurial skills and transnational positioning enabling her to expand her literary fame

while earning financial capital. While she printed most children's books through her own printing press, she also printed novels in London and Taiwan, getting a higher quality at a lower cost. She was also successful in soliciting grants from Nigerian Ministries for Education for the production of books for children in primary and secondary schools (Umeh 2010, 113). Through Tana Press, Nwapa could thus use her transnational exposure and experience for the benefit of local literary production, promoting the work of her compatriots, while increasing their income. When it comes to her own success, it appears that Flora Nwapa's fourth novel, *One Is Enough* (1982), sold in over 50,000 copies in two years, affording her to buy a flat in St John's Wood, a posh area of London (Umeh 2010, 115).

Through Tana Press, Flora Nwapa could self-publish her books, while targeting local and global markets. Bryce has argued that Nwapa's self-published novels, like *One Is Enough* and *Women Are Different*, differ somewhat in style from her first, internationally published novels *Efuru* and *Idu*. Building on Barber's discussion of popular style, Bryce suggests that Nwapa's writing style evolved toward popular literature, catering to readers at home, taking their literacy levels and language competence into consideration (Bryce 1998, 400–401). But, while Nwapa may have targeted Nigerian readers, she did not ignore the global market. In 1992, she republished five of her locally self-published works in the United States with Africa World Press Inc (Umeh 1998a, 678). Thus, rather than writing for either local or international audiences, Nwapa wrote for both, her creolized aesthetic and cosmopolitan orientation enabling her works to move across vernacular and cosmopolitan literary circuits.

Social media-savvy Salamatu Sule

Salamatu Sule is a talented young writer devoted to the promotion of literature who has the ambition to be Nigeria's first female literary agent. Born in 1982 in Kogi State in the central region, Salamatu is Muslim. Her father is a farmer, her mother a trader, and she lives in Abuja with her sister, who is an entrepreneur. Salamatu went to public schools and holds a BA in English and literature studies and a diploma in law, from Kogi State University.

Her mother tongue is Igala, and she also speaks English and Hausa. When we first met, Salamatu was not yet married, but, by the time we met again in July 2018, she was engaged.

Salamatu has read 'a little of everything', from the Hausa translation of *Arabian Nights* to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, as well as African classics. Nowadays she reads contemporary African writers, as well as classics and poetry from other parts of the world. Salamatu has been greatly inspired by Zaynab Alkali. She appreciates the way Alkali writes, in a simple and straightforward manner, just like Flora Nwapa. Salamatu started to scribble at a very tender age, mostly for herself. Friends who read her writings found them very good and encouraged her. Salamatu writes poetry, to express her feelings and thoughts, without offending anyone. She also writes children's stories and has tried writing short stories, although she did not have enough patience. Salamatu also writes reviews and articles. Some of her poems have been published on social media and in newspapers, but at the time we met she had not yet published a full compilation. In the future, she would like to explore all genres, to see where she fits in. She writes in English but tries to bring in elements of her mother tongue Igala in her poetry.

The distribution of her works through social media (blogs) and print media (newspapers) laid the foundations for Salamatu's literary agency. In 2015, the Embassy of Germany invited her for the annual book fair in Frankfurt, an exciting experience that she wrote about in a blog, comparing the book fair to a 'big book'.[17] She was surprised that they knew of her, but they had found her online. Having spent considerable time and effort on reviews of new releases, and often marking editorial mistakes in manuscripts she read, Salamatu decided to quit her job at an NGO to devote her time to literature. Editing manuscripts, writing reviews, organizing readings and promoting new literary works through online and print media were tasks that she was already familiar with and loved to do. So she turned herself into a literary agent.

One of the reasons Salamatu wants to promote literature is the common perception among aspiring writers that, unless you

[17] https://www.blueprint.ng/my-blast-moments-at-the-2015-frankfurt-book-fair-sule, last accessed on 29 July 2020.

make yourself a name internationally (like Chimamanda Adichie), it is very difficult to become established in Nigeria. 'I wanted to change that perception, so I said, that cannot be true. You have to put in extra effort to put yourself out there.' Having successfully established her name, she reflected: 'You do not have to travel miles to make a certain impact. All you have to do is do work that is unique, and do it in a way that people benefit from it,' noting, 'there is so much out there, which people are not talking about and there are so many books out there, which people don't even know about.' So Salamatu writes reviews: 'I read the book, not to critique it per se, but to give a holistic angle of what I think about the universe of the book.' After reading her reviews, people contact her asking where they can get hold of the book, the review thus functioning as 'public disclosure'.

Salamatu uses social media to promote writers, literature and literary events. She is active on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and blogs. In addition to organizing literary events, she writes about them in local media, for instance newspaper articles that are redistributed on blogs. On YouTube, she appears in recorded interviews and through LinkedIn, she develops professional networks for her literary agency. On Facebook, Salamatu has over 1,100 friends and she uses her page to promote events like book readings, ANA events and World Book Day, as well as to share her poems and other writings.

Salamatu recognizes digitally mediated interaction to be a key aspect of her success in literary self-making: 'For me, I think one of my biggest successes has been using the digital platform to showcase myself and also to promote authors.' She reflected how social media had broadened her outreach: 'Now a lot of people ask me on my different social media platforms: "please let us know when your book comes out, we are very much interested and would like to read it." If I can use this platform to showcase myself then one really can go far in terms of outreach.' For a literary agent, digital media is clearly a critical tool for networking and promotion, thus underlining the importance of digital infrastructure for creative self-making in world literature (Uimonen 2019b). This is not to say that digital media has replaced previous infrastructures, just like the printed book has not yet been replaced by e-books. Rather, digital infrastructure is used alongside

print and broadcast media, as well as networking, literary events and face to face meetings, forming part of a wider infrastructure of world literature.

Similarly to Lizi and other writers, Salamatu is driven by the ethics of art for society's sake, which is a distinguishing characteristic of the creolized aesthetics of Nigerian women writers. She writes across genres, thus mixing traditional and modern forms of storytelling. She also uses different platforms to express herself, from printed books to social media. And she is an avid reader of literature from near and afar, from classic novels to poetry. Concerned with her country's development, Salamatu writes poetry to register her disenchantment with the state of things, while promoting literature that offer alternative universes for readers' imaginaries.

In 2017, Salamatu published her first book, *Oma, The Drummer Queen* (Sule 2017). It is a children's book, published in the Children's Literature Series of the Nigerian Writers Series by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). When evaluating her book, the publishers were enthusiastic, and one editor concluded: 'This has all the elements of a good story. […] The story is free from moralizing and yet has a strong moral woven into it. It shows that there are no limits for the girl-child even in a traditional, patriarchal setting.'

Beautifully illustrated with colour drawings, *Oma, The Drummer Queen* tells the story of a young girl who inherits a magic drum from her father, Aremu. Aremu was a hunter who ventured into the forest on a forbidden day. A spirit appeared, demanding that the hunter clear the bush to atone for his trespassing. Having worked hard until sunset, Aremu was awarded with a dirty old drum. The next day, he played the drum at a royal wedding, and, to everyone's surprise, the sound was enthralling. The hunter became known as Olori Onilu, head drummer. While his wife was pregnant with Oma, Aremu died, after having asked her to pass on his drum to his child, if it were a boy. But the child turned out to be a girl. Although Oma showed great interest in drumming, her mother did not take her seriously; after all, drumming was for boys. But Oma insisted. When the king fell ill, she went to the palace, dressed up like a boy. Various drummers tried to cure the king, but they all failed. But when little Oma started

drumming on her late father's drum, the king recovered from his illness. Oma was recognized as Drummer Queen. The story ends with the words: 'The young drummer queen grew up to become a very beautiful woman. Spectators would travel to watch her drum on invitation during important occasions from one kingdom to another, spreading her pleasant rhythm' (Sule 2017, 43).

Digital revival of Tana Press

By invoking Flora Nwapa, I wish to bring attention to publishing, in recognition of her path-breaking accomplishments as the first female publisher in Africa. As discussed in this chapter, publishing in Africa is beset with numerous structural challenges, which are instructive of the uneven development of the world-literature system. Even so, it would be erroneous to assume that 'a situation persists in which African writers must largely look to the West for their audiences' (Krishnan 2014, 133). As documented elsewhere, African literary markets have attracted both local and international publishers, despite structural challenges such as underdeveloped infrastructure, limited book reading cultures and education-oriented consumer priorities (e.g. Currey 2008; Davis 2013; Jay and Kelly 2002; Kamau and Mitambo 2016; Suhr-Sytsma 2018). As exemplified by Flora Nwapa, publishers have often been transnational, catering to local as well as international audiences. Indeed, the creolized aesthetic can also be gleaned in the local publishing industry, which has dexterously adapted to both internal and external influences, despite the political economy of the world-literature system, including the devastations of structural adjustment programmes (see Davis 2013; Jay and Kelly 2002). These days Nigeria is home to some of the most innovative publishers in the global market, such as Cassava Republic and Okada Books, which use digital and mobile media to publish and distribute a growing corpus of literature (Suhr-Sytsma 2018). Although it remains to be seen if the Internet is creating a new aesthetic form, as in cyborature (Thiong'o 2014, 85), similarly to elsewhere in the world, digital media is certainly influencing literary practices in Africa, from digitally mediated performance poetry (Uimonen 2018) to online publishing (Uimonen 2019b).

The 50th anniversary edition of *Efuru* marked the revival of Tana Press, under the management of Flora Nwapa's son, Uzoma Nwakuche. In preparation of the event, he prepared the manuscript, involving several people in editing and proofreading, including Salamatu Sule, who also helped out with the new cover, designed by Akila Jibrin. The front cover displays the portrait of a woman, gazing into the distance, her face framed by a voluminous head wrap, ears adorned with jewellery, eyes and lips accentuated by make-up. The colours are discreet tones of mauve and grey, the title *Efuru* in large emboldened capital letters in white on top and the name Flora Nwapa at the bottom. A small gold coloured emblem on the cover: 50th Anniversary Edition. On the back cover is the Efuru@50 logo on white background and a long text summarizing the life of Flora Nwapa and the story of Efuru. The text ends with: 'A trailblazer of women's literature and issues in Africa and beyond, the author and her classic, pioneering work is as relevant today as ever, a must for contemporary readers and future generations.'

The new edition has a foreword by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, noting earlier editions of *Efuru*, while underlining Nwapa's pioneering work:

> *Efuru* is the first novel by a female African author published internationally; a trailblazer, an inspiration and a 'first' in many ways: Flora Nwapa was posthumously recognized in New York as Nigeria's First Lady of Letters; she has presented the first narration of an African village woman's life and plight from an insider's female perspective; she has protected women throughout her life and career; she is an icon and a role model for women in Nigeria, Africa and beyond.

She concludes with an anthropological observation informed by her deep understanding of the cultural context of Efuru and Flora Nwapa:

> Efuru and her dreams provoke the understanding that water/the Lake Goddess/woman (of the lake) must be valued by herself, as an asset to society even without a child. Nwapa's dialectical opposition creates a dynamic that vindicates womanhood and projects female powers and potentials on several levels from the deep past into the far flung future.

This eloquent introduction by a distinguished European female scholar positions the book in an international circuit of literary fame, while ethnographically anchoring it in local culture. In addition to contextualizing Flora Nwapa and *Efuru* in Oguta culture, Jell-Bahlsen's foreword asserts the fame of Flora Nwapa, a cultural framing that validates the temporal expansion of her cultural influence, 'from the deep past into the far flung future'.

The 50th anniversary edition of *Efuru* was printed in 500 copies at a commercial printing press in Abuja. The cost of print was supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, one of the sponsors of Efuru@50. Uzoma Nwakuche aimed for a reasonably high-quality print, using thicker paper on the cover and pages. Although the quality of the printed pages varied, the printed cover was of high quality, as was the binding.

Most of the copies were distributed for free to secondary schools participating in the event. Students received copies in advance so they could prepare the quizzes and dramatizations organized during the celebrations. Some copies were also sold during the event.

A digital version of the 50th anniversary edition of *Efuru* was also made available through Kindle, the electronic reader of the online bookshop Amazon.com. The Kindle edition was published on Amazon on 20 December 2016, shortly after the Efuru@50 event. Product details list Tana Press as publisher, while the book is sold by Amazon Digital Services LLC.

This was the first digital edition of Flora Nwapa's books by Tana Press, signalling the revival of her publishing company in the age of digital publishing. No longer constrained by the materiality of print, Tana Press could distribute the new edition of *Efuru* to readers around the world, using the established platform of Amazon. Unlike the printed version of *Efuru*, the Kindle edition was born to travel, a mobile literary object moved by digital infrastructure. At the same time, the book remained firmly embedded in global literary infrastructure, in this case the world's leading online bookstore.

On Amazon, *Efuru* is available in two different print versions and two digital ones. One is the Heinemann African Writers Series edition of 1966, available as paperback through various related sites as used or new copies, priced from US$6.27 (used) to

US$176.11 and even higher (new). A second version is the reissue edition of 2013, published by Waveland Press, Inc. The edition is available as hardcover (US$49.95), paperback (US$13.85 to 15.95) and Kindle (US$9.57). The paperback version has three reviews by scholars at universities in the US and UK, enthusiastically endorsing the reprint. The third version is the 50th anniversary edition, which is only available as Kindle.

These different editions show the dynamics of literary production, as books are reconfigured in different forms. From the original first edition, through the reissue edition, to the 50th anniversary edition, *Efuru* has been repackaged and recirculated. The cover is different for all three versions, although a lone woman appears on all of them, a form of visual intertextuality that underlines the book's female focus. Over time, we can note a progression from material to digital objects, accentuating the book's global mobility.

Targeting digital distribution, Tana Press has recently released more e-books. Over the last few years, Tana Press has collaborated with Worldreader, an ambitious initiative that promotes reading culture in Africa, through the provision of a mobile reading application and a digital library. According to their web site, they have distributed over 32,000 e-readers and 5.5 million digital books to 551 schools and libraries in Africa.[18] Tana Press has made available eight novels by Flora Nwapa through Worldreader. In return, Tana Press received digital versions of the novels, which it started distributing through Amazon and other online book stores in July 2020.

Tana Press also aims to reprint Flora Nwapa's books and sell them at a price that can reduce the circulation of pirated copies. Similarly to other culture industries in Nigeria, piracy poses a considerable challenge to writers and publishers (see also Larkin 2008). Books in demand are often pirated, printed in low quality and sold cheaply. For instance, pirated copies of *Efuru*, which is on the reading list at some higher learning institutes, are sold at 400 naira. It is a much lower price than the 3,000 naira for the 50th anniversary edition, and students are unlikely to buy the more expensive version. Although piracy can strengthen reading

[18] https://www.worldreader.org, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

culture through the distribution of low-cost books, it is highly problematic for commercial publishers.

In 2017, Tana Press published *The Lake Goddess*, Flora Nwapa's last novel. In 1992, Flora Nwapa had given the manuscript to colleagues in the US for editing, computing, printing and publishing (Umeh 1998a, 678). But since Flora Nwapa passed on the following year, the manuscript was left untouched. The posthumous publication of *The Lake Goddess* was timed with the annual conference for the African Literature Association (ALA) at Yale University in June 2017. The first batch was printed in hardback and shipped to the US, followed by a paperback version a few months later. A Kindle edition will follow.

In April 2018, Uzoma Nwakuche presented *The Lake Goddess* at the Stockholm Literary Fair and the Stockholm City Library in Sweden. The event programme was a collaborative project between Stockholm University and the International Library at the Stockholm City Library. At the Literature Fair, Uzoma Nwakuche and myself engaged in a conversation with Professor Stefan Helgesson in a panel entitled *Flora Nwapa and African Women in World Literature*. We also organized a display table in the exhibition, featuring *The Lake Goddess* and *Efuru*, along with a selection of the International Library's collection of books by African women writers, many in Swedish translation. Two days later, Uzoma Nwakuche and I held a public talk at the International Library on 'Flora Nwapa's Literary Legacy'.

These international connections underscore the significance of social networking for literary production and circulation. As noted by Wulff, networking is a critical aspect of writers' careers, for publication as well as promotion (Wulff 2017). Flora Nwapa herself led a busy life, attending book fairs, conferences, seminars and other literary events in Africa, Europe and the US, especially after the establishment of Tana Press in 1977. If anything, her networking accelerated over time, culminating in numerous international (Dutch, Kenyan, Swedish and US) and national (Owerri, Nsukka) engagements in 1992, the year before she passed on (Umeh 1998a, 675–9). Similarly to contemporary women writers, Nwapa presented, exhibited and sold her books through such channels, while establishing valuable contacts in literary circles.

Digital infrastructure is clearly opening up new opportunities for publishers, thus contributing to the decentring of world literature, as exemplified by the revival of Tana Press.[19] No longer constrained by costly printing equipment or analogue marketing, even small publishing houses can enter the global book market, catering to local as well as global readers. Although malfunctioning digital infrastructure poses new challenges (Uimonen 2019b), indicating that structural and material inequalities are not so easily overcome in the world-literature system, digital media is also creating new opportunities for literary agents like Salamatu Sule, as discussed above. Meanwhile, digital media is already influencing the very essence of literature, as new styles of reading and writing are developing, blurring the lines between the written and the orally transmitted and pointing towards some kind of 'cyborature' (Thiong'o 2014, 85). Seeing that new forms of online cultural expression also engage other sense, especially watching and listening, it would appear that cyborature will be a multimodal, multisensorial and multilingual aesthetic form.

[19] http://www.tanapressltd.com, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

5. Culture and Relationality in Owerri

Celebrity children, deep culture and keynote debut

We left the hotel in Enugu early in the morning, after quickly loading our suitcases and bags of books on the back of the pick-up. There was no time for breakfast, so we bought some snacks along the way. It was a short drive to Owerri and the road was in good condition. Uzoma was driving as usual; we stayed mostly quiet in the car, still sleepy after the early wake-up.

Owerri, the state capital of Imo State, was the final destination of Efuru@50. While Enugu was politically significant, as symbolized by the attendance of the deputy governor and her ceremonial unveiling of Efuru, the Owerri event turned out to be steeped in Igbo/Oguta culture.

We made our way to the Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, the host of the Owerri event. We drove into the campus and asked for directions, eventually reaching the Department of English Language and Literature in the School of Languages. A large yellow signpost, suspended between heavy metal poles, marked the entrance to the department, proudly announcing its motto in bold capital letters: CREATIVITY IN DEVELOPMENT. A few cars were parked outside and notice boards hung on the exterior walls downstairs. On a nearby building, a sign for the Department of Nigerian Languages caught my eye. It was an impressive school of languages, encompassing English as well as Nigerian languages. I also noted a manifestation of sorts at the other end of the campus yard, near what seemed a large auditorium. A large group of people, accompanied by uniformed guards, were getting ready for an event. They carried a very large poster banner with UNDP and UN logos, announcing

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INTERNATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION DAY and UNITED AGAINST CORRUPTION. Fighting corruption in Nigeria: what a tall task, I thought to myself as we entered our building.[20]

A courtesy call to the head of department was the first item on our agenda and we were ushered into her office, seated on blue cushioned sofas, with a low glass-top table between. At the back of the office was a metal filing cabinet and a small TV on top, at the front a large desk filled with stacks of paper and files. The head of department and her colleagues were thrilled to meet the children of Flora Nwapa. We had group photos taken to mark the visit.

It was clear that the children of Flora Nwapa had celebrity status, the offspring of a highly esteemed writer. One of the lecturers talked about her course on female writers in Africa and explained that *Efuru* had been taught for many years. Ejine recalled how her mom had taught creative writing at the department for a year, somewhere around 1975/76. Uzoma discussed possibilities for future collaboration with the Flora Nwapa Foundation. His plan was to publish a commercial version of the 50th anniversary edition of Efuru to be sold at a lower price, so students did not need to buy pirated copies, which were sold at 400 naira. I had seen a pirated copy in Enugu; it was the size and appearance of the original, even the same cover image.

We were led to a small lecture room near the office, which served as the venue for the event. The room had four rows of wooden desks and white plastic chairs and two long wooden desks at the front. The space only had a seating capacity of around 50 people and got overfilled very quickly, students sitting on top of the tables to make room for more people. The head of department apologized; she had not been notified in advance, otherwise they would have organized a much more suitable venue. Uzoma later told me that they almost cancelled the Owerri event. They had expected to involve the governor, but the plan fell through. In the printed programme Owerri was announced as the grand finale, with an honourable minister as chairman and the Imo State governor as chief host, but the event turned out more low key.

[20] Corruption in Nigeria is dealt with in great detail in Smith's monograph *A Culture of Corruption* (2007).

Amede and Ejine prepared a table of books and event bags near the front desks and the event poster was pinned on the front wall. The book table doubled as a speaker's podium. The room was quite warm, despite the ceiling fans and open windows. Some floor fans were added near the front desks, but they were mainly whisking around the tepid air.

I was quite relieved by the venue, since I was the keynote presenter, which was a big first for me. Wale and Uzoma had come up with the idea in Abuja. Apparently word had got around that a European associate professor was attending the event, so organizers in Owerri had asked if she could deliver a keynote, since they did not have a keynote speaker. I felt awkward at first, not coming close to the stature of the keynote speakers in Lagos, Maiduguri, Abuja and Enugu. 'Would it help you if I do it?' I asked Wale, and he answered in the affirmative. So I accepted the kind offer. I had spent a few evenings in Abuja writing a brief keynote, summarizing and reflecting on the Efuru@50 celebrations, citing the keynotes in Lagos and Maiduguri, and briefly summarizing my paper. Since I was not an expert on Flora Nwapa, or Nigerian literature, I thought a keynote expressing my reflections on the event was the best I could do. I also made sure to mention my intellectual mentor Professor Ulf Hannerz, who had supervised my PhD years earlier and who had done research in Nigeria in the 1970s. It felt correct to acknowledge him in my first keynote, especially since it was delivered in Nigeria, one of his early field sites. I also added some reflections on my initial worries and the hospitality I had enjoyed, especially in Maiduguri, along with appreciative words of Flora Nwapa's children.

At the end of the day, several participants remarked on how hard I had worked, which was a great compliment. By then I had learned that Igbo women are very hard-working, so my anthropological immersion had paid off. People had seen me paying close attention throughout the day, taking notes and photographs, and filming. While some participants had walked in and out of the room, others briefly dozing off, I had remained alert.

I was tired, but satisfied that I had managed to follow the Efuru@50 event to its conclusion, together with the children of Flora Nwapa. Amede's husband joined us for the last day, and

they were sitting together at the high table. This was my last day with Amede, as she returned to Lagos with her husband. Ejine and Uzoma still had a trip to make.

Little did I know that the highlight of my journey was just around the corner: Oguta. In that sense, Owerri was just a prelude to an even deeper cultural encounter as I got a chance to briefly immerse myself in the hometown of Flora Nwapa and experience the lake of the Goddess. But, as we concluded the Owerri event with a very late lunch at a posh restaurant, all I felt was relief that the Efuru@50 event had come to a successful completion.

Concluding Efuru@50 with mighty swords and God's blessings

'*Okoma! Okoma!*' the titled members of Igbu society exclaimed as they walked into the room, ritually greeting each other by clashing their ceremonial swords four times. *Okoma*, mighty sword, was a greeting evoking the tradition of using swords to hunt leopards. A short, elderly man blew a horn to accentuate the greetings; another beat a small drum. The titled men were middle-aged and older, dressed in knee-long shirts and long wraps. They all wore hats with two long feathers; some also wore long beaded necklaces and wristbands, made of pinkish coral. Uzoma greeted all of them, having added feathers to the dark grey felt hat he had worn since morning. 'They must be titled men,' the lecturer sitting next to me whispered, 'traditional leaders.' Uzoma directed the men to the chairs at the high table. After a while some more titled men appeared, including Flora Nwapa's brother, Chief Christopher Nwapa, and the greetings resumed. The titled men had travelled all the way from Oguta to honour Flora Nwapa, an unusual rite, I was later told, since they rarely travel outside the hometown for such purposes.

The titled men took turns making brief comments about *Efuru* in the context of Oguta culture, using her prestigious title: *Ogbuefi* (Killer of Cow) Flora Nwapa. In writing the novel, Flora Nwapa was 'showing how Oguta was and how it was growing', an elderly man remarked, not least 'the palm produce market', which was centred in Oguta. 'Our women, Oguta women, played very, very important roles in the market,' he underlined. The women used

Figure 7. Titled members of Igbu society paying homage to Ogbuefi Flora Nwapa. Photograph by author.

the money to help their families and their husbands, he noted, and at the same time they were very obedient. Thus, Efuru was an average Oguta woman, who helped her husband and family by trading. She struggled and struggled, but unable to lift up her family, she focused on her own self. 'Efuru decided on her own, to follow her chi', thus demonstrating that she was a hard-working woman, even though her husband did not lend her a hand as he was supposed to. In traditional Oguta society, husbands and wives worked together for the family, he concluded.

'*Igbo kwenu! Oguta kwenu!*' Ernest Nwapa greeted the audience, raising his fist as he articulated the words, his greetings accentuated by the fellow blowing the horn. 'Today is a great day, and, when you see us here, we're all here to honour our sister.' He spoke with a big smile on his face. After his greetings, Ernest remarked, 'I think this is all part of our cultural background that we try to revive,' adding, '*Efuru* the novel was also something that collected and kind of chronicled the Oguta culture and beyond that Igbo culture as a whole.' Now an in-law of the Flora Nwapa family, Ernest recollected how his schoolmates used to

think he was Flora Nwapa's child, since they had the same surname, a misconception that he readily played along with. After all, she was the first female commissioner in East Central State, so his status was augmented by affiliation to the honourable Flora Nwapa. When he eventually married the daughter of Flora Nwapa's younger brother, he had to set the records straight, since people thought he was marrying his sister. His remarks met with laughter from the audience. Ernest then proceeded with a eulogy to Flora Nwapa:

> We value Auntie Flora, not as an Oguta woman, not as a Nigerian woman, as an African woman, as a woman that belongs to the whole world. And we are so happy that this community of writers, these people that have given us the food from which we have nurtured our intellect over the years, have remembered Flora Nwapa and her works. Those works would never die. In fact, the more they stay, the more we value them. The children that we have, who can't pick up some of the things that started with our culture, because we don't do those things again, but those things are still relevant in life.
>
> I'll tell you that, whatever we are doing today, the value is not in the number of governors that are here or in the number of other dignitaries, it's not in the comfort of this venue, but it is in the power of the intellect that is assembled here. And I want to congratulate you.
>
> We came to represent the Igbu society here [points at his fellows at the high table], because Flora belonged to us, we claim her from every angle, we yearn for her, we wanted her to live forever. But today, she is still alive. Thank you very much. [sound of horn and applause]

This tribute framed Flora Nwapa in local culture, while spatially expanding her fame to the whole world and temporally into eternity. By claiming Flora Nwapa on behalf of the titled Igbu society, Ernest anchored Flora Nwapa in Oguta culture, while valorizing her as a woman that belongs to the whole world, thus affirming her sphere of cultural influence from the very local to the global, from the very particular to the universal. By emphasizing immortality, acknowledging that her books never die and that the author is still alive, he also extended Flora Nwapa's value into infinity, while forecasting that the value of books increase with time.

Chief Christopher Nwapa, the patriarch of the Flora Nwapa family, spoke at some length, sharing anecdotes of his older sister Flora. Dressed up for the occasion in a long white shirt and a black top hat, a string of coral beads tied around one wrist and a loosely hanging watch around the other, the chief peered through his dark-rimmed glasses, his eyes bright with excitement. After greeting everyone in Oguta dialect, he switched to English, which he spoke fluently and eloquently, with old-school polish. 'I had to rush down from US in order to be present for this gathering.' His words met with applause and blowing of the horn, after which he continued, 'That shows what importance I attach to it.' Chief Nwapa recalled the 'wonderful' event in Enugu the day before, a 'very, very, very successful celebration in honour of my late sister Flora.' He underlined that Flora was two years his senior and would have been 85 if she had still been alive, as the chief was 'already 83', to which the audience applauded. He recollected how his life was 'intertwined' with his sister's, until death separated them. He had encouraged Flora to apply to the University College Ibadan in the 1950s, and she became the first student admitted by direct admission. During that time the queen of England visited Nigeria and Flora received the queen on behalf of the University College Ibadan. 'We are a family of teachers, my parents were teachers, I retired as a teacher,' he noted, recalling how, when he was teaching at a grammar school in Onitsha and Flora was at Queen's School in Enugu, she told him she was coming to be his guest in Onitsha.

> Flora drove from Enugu to my house. Immediately she got to my house, she started writing this *Efuru* [points to the table of books]. And this was in 1960. That is when she started writing. I did not know that Efuru would be internationally recognized. I thank everyone here for this purpose.

He then talked about the book he had recently written about Nigeria's political leadership, which would be published the following year. In the book, he had written that 'Nigeria is a country where talent is neither recognized nor rewarded', which was 'a very serious failure on the part of Nigerian political leaders'. The publication of his book had been postponed due to the sudden death of his wife, who was buried in Oguta in June 2016. Chief

Nwapa's children had advised him to wait for a year before proceeding with publication. 'I was trying to follow the footsteps of my sister in writing, but her book is for literature; mine is for politics,' he remarked and the audience laughed.

Chief Nwapa shared some of Flora's family history, recognizing the 'products' of her marriages: the children. He mentioned Flora's relationship with Gogo Nzeribe, noting, 'they have a product and that product is here, Ejine Nzeribe.' The audience applauded. 'Then the war broke out, and when it broke out it was a problem.' Chief Nwapa sent a telegram to his sister, urging her to 'Proceed to the east; the situation is critical in this country.' At the time she was assistant registrar at University of Lagos. 'So Flora came down, drove down to Oguta, and said "what am I to do?" I did not know what to tell her, but she told me that one young man wanted to marry her.' The man was Gogo Nwakuche and Flora married him. 'Let me tell you. I am proud to be with Flora's son by Gogo Nwakuche; he is here [turns to Uzoma sitting by his side].' The audience applauded and he added excitedly, 'and Flora's daughter by Gogo Nwakuche, she is here,' as his eyes searched the room for Amede.

He then remarked that the future was unpredictable to man; only God could predict the future, adding 'If we knew, there would be no war, I can assure you.' He mentioned the unpredictability of Trump's victory in the last US election and Brexit as points of comparison. 'So, none of us can predict the future and that is why I am particularly happy that I am able to take part in this ceremony.' He concluded by profusely thanking everyone for the 'recognition' of his late sister. 'I love everybody here. Again, to give honour to my sister, I appreciate it. God will bless all of you and God will bless all of us. And most of us here will live up to next year to give glory to God and to hope that this country will be a better place. Thank you!' The musician blew the horn and the chief was warmly applauded as he returned the microphone to the MC. The titled elders stood up and, after greeting each other with their swords, they left the room.

Through God's blessings, Chief Nwapa ascertained the cultural framing of spirituality, while grounding Flora Nwapa's fame in her family. The religious dimension of Efuru@50 was again

manifest through prayers and invocations of God, whose ultimate power over human destiny was taken for granted, validated through sacred engagements. Chief Nwapa also brought forth Flora Nwapa's family relations, especially her children, thus valorizing her motherhood. By telling the story of how Flora Nwapa started writing *Efuru* in his house, Chief Nwapa also established a birthplace for his sister's literary career, a literary family home, so to speak. Having traced Flora Nwapa's literary origins, while contextualizing her lifework in lineages that both preceded and succeeded her life on earth, he channelled the expansion of intersubjective spacetime through family and kinship.

The chairman, an elderly man dressed in a colourful shirt of traditional design proceeded with the kola breaking welcoming ritual. At the high table, the titled elders had been replaced by the head of department, the children of Flora Nwapa and some eminent scholars. The chairperson held one of the eight kola nuts and explained its cultural symbolism, emphasizing the value of complementary binaries and duality. An Owerri man was called upon to bless the kola nuts, which he did in Igbo. The kola nuts were broken and pieces distributed according to social status. To my great delight, I received a piece of kola nut as 'the ultimate expression of hospitality'. I asked the lecturer next to me what to do with it. 'Take it home with you,' he advised, so I slipped it into my bag. Everyone else ate their kola nuts, which I was told have a bitter taste.

A student dramatization of *Efuru* followed, incorporating traditional dance, performed with exquisite precision. The students wore traditional garments, the boys in singlets and wrappers with long knitted caps, the girls in wrappers and batik dresses, with chalk markings on their legs, arms and faces. Some girls wore plastic beads, artificial versions of the traditional coral beaded necklaces. The dramatization was staged in front of the high table, in a squeezed space of only a few square metres. The dance was performed by half a dozen female students, rhythmically swinging their arms and hips in synchronized union, while two male students beat the rhythm on traditional instruments, a wooden *uko* and a large metal bell. The dancers wore strings of small bells around their ankles, the sound of their movements

enhancing the rhythmic sound of the instruments. The male student actors sat on plastic chairs around the dancers, some giving notes of money to the girls as a token of appreciation. A female teacher led the dance, her rhythmic swaying accentuated by the tightly wrapped batik cloth around her hips.

The paper session started with my keynote, followed by five papers presented by one male and five female scholars. The first scholar presented a paper on an absent professor's behalf, discussing Efuru as a proto-feminist. The presenter added that she herself refuted feminism, on cultural grounds. Two young female scholars were next, and they articulated their disagreement with the previous speaker, underlining that cultures change. Their paper emphasized the independence of women in Flora Nwapa's work, from a womanist perspective. The male lecturer offered a comparison of Flora Nwapa and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, arguing that feminism was a lack of wisdom and that women were the problem. A young female scholar followed, with a critical analysis of patriarchal assumptions in Efuru, using feminist and womanist theoretical frameworks. The last presenter interrogated the aesthetics of pain in the literature of the third-generation African women writers, referring to them as the granddaughters of Flora Nwapa.

Heated discussion erupted during the paper presentations, especially on feminism and the position of women in society. One young male participant launched out against -isms, like feminism or womanism. 'These -isms came from the west,' he argued; 'academics just use them to promote their careers.' Other male participants argued that the fault was with women, because of the choices they made. But one of the male participants stood up for women, emphasizing how they were oppressed in different ways. Many of the female scholars argued vehemently, insisting that patriarchal structures limited women from developing their full potential. At one point, one of the female presenters brought up female genital mutilation (FGM) as an example of a negative cultural practice. To her (and my) surprise, the chairman defended the practice, arguing that it helped women control themselves and reduced the risk of infections. The women refused to back down, challenging their male colleagues and arguing for cultural change

to liberate women in society, using Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's example of how the practice of killing twins was a thing of the past (Adichie 2014).

The chairman emphasized *complementary binaries* between the sexes. Confident in his cultural expertise, he acted as a cultural gatekeeper, staunchly defending traditional beliefs and practices. In pre-colonial culture women had a strong position in society, he emphasized. But women were degraded through the influence of Arabic and European cultures, he argued. Throughout the heated discussions on gender, the chairman kept insisting on complementarity as a cultural core value, encouraging people to think along the lines of *natural feminism*.

As the programme drew to an end, Ejine Njeribe, Flora Nwapa's eldest daughter, made an eloquent statement, thanking everyone for keeping her mother's legacy alive:

> Thank you very much for seeing the Nwapa family to the end of the celebration of Efuru@50 2016. For us it is a great joy that we have ended the celebration in Alvan Ikoku College of Education. And I say that on behalf of my family with all pride, for the simple reason that sometime in 1977/78, Flora Nwapa came to this same institution as a visiting lecturer in the Department of English for one year to teach. So it is befitting that we are here today. We would like to thank the Dean of the Faculty, we would like to thank the provost of the school, we would like to thank the head of department, we would like to thank our Igbo chairman, we would like to thank all the speakers, all the students, all the performers, all the entertainers, for being here with us today. As I've said in the past, it started from Lagos, through Maiduguri, to Abuja, to Enugu and now Owerri. And we are delighted that indeed Flora Nwapa's legacy lives on. Thank you very much! God bless you as you go back to your different destinations. Thank you!

Flora Nwapa's sister, Mrs Bee Emeni, who had arrived in the afternoon, was asked to say a prayer, thus reasserting the feminine and spiritual framing of Efuru@50. She stood up, holding the microphone in her right hand, and, after clearing her throat, she prayed:

> In Jesus' name, Father, we thank you for this time. We say thank you for keeping us here, for bringing us here. Now we are preparing to

> go home, lead us back home safely. And we pray to God Almighty that you bless everyone who came for this occasion, that you bless them and bless them. Father, thank you for everything you have done this day in Jesus' name. [amen]

We gathered for a group photo, which a photographer captured from a bird's-eye angle, standing on a desk. Those who remained were Flora Nwapa's children, the head of department, the chairman, the MC, paper presenters, some performers and a few students. One of the performers held an event bag in his hand, a visual symbol of the Efuru@50 celebrations that had now come to an end, a sacred object in a sacred drama that was culturally framed in femininity and spirituality.

Flora Nwapa's social worlds and spiritual relations

While world literature scholarship tends to focus on texts and their circulation, as an anthropologist I am drawn to writers, their cultural context and social relations, to better appreciate the intricacies of literary worldmaking. Recognizing the social agency of art objects, Gell has defined the anthropology of art as the study of 'social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating agency' (Gell 1998, 7). This relational theory of art is quite applicable to literature, since books are embedded in social relations and mediate the social agency of worldmaking. By comparison, literary scholars have underlined that aesthetic worlds always have a relation to the lived world, 'whether as a largely preconscious normative construct, a rearticulation, or even an active refusal of the world-norms of their age', and in this sense they are 'social and conceptual constructs, as well as formal and affective ones' (Hayot 2012, 45). To tease out some of the relations in Flora Nwapa's literary production, we need to keep in mind her womanist perspective. But let us start with Flora Nwapa's social self, seeing that 'any one social individual is the sum of their relations (distributed over biographical time and space) with other persons' (Gell 1998, 222). As an African woman writer, Flora Nwapa clearly embodied the notion that everything exists in 'meshworks of relations' (Escobar 2020, 4).

It has been suggested that Flora Nwapa's writings were autobiographical, drawing on personal experiences, while offering an

outlet for personal frustrations, although Flora Nwapa herself has denied such connections. When asked by Umeh 'Are there any autobiographical elements in your writing?' she responded, 'None! I am not like Efuru, neither am I like Idu, neither am I Amaka in any way' (Umeh 1995, 26). Even so, Marie Umeh, the author of Flora Nwapa's biography (Umeh 2010), has insisted on the 'intermingling' of the personal and the public in her works, arguing that 'the ability to write implied a measure of autonomy' and 'enabled Nwapa to exercise some control over the circumstances in her life' (Umeh 2001, 343). Using the self-in-hiding concept of a literary critic, Umeh argues that 'Nwapa used the power of the pen not only, to extol Ugwuta women for their industry, intelligence, magnanimity, and strength but also, to explore, analyze, and explain the emotional turmoil in her own life, the lives of her female kith and kin, and Ugwuta women generally' (Umeh 2001, 344).

Building on anthropological theory, the ways in which Nwapa's social worlds intertwined with her literary worlds can be approached in terms of cultural creativity instead of individual autobiography. In anthropological theory, creativity is a social rather than individual phenomenon, a process of cultural improvisation rather than innovation, which is relational, temporal and generative (Hallam and Ingold 2007). The relationality of art connects literature to social life, regardless of how fictitious it may be rendered, since writers cannot fully detach themselves from their social selves. As Gell has argued, our inner personhood is related to and replicates our external (collective) social being, which is why personhood is spread around in time and space (1998, 222–3). Comparatively, Hayot notes that 'Aesthetic worldedness is the form of the relation a work establishes between the world inside and the world outside the work' (Hayot 2012, 45). Thus, rather than assessing Flora Nwapa's literary products as autobiographical reflections of her individual self, we can appreciate her creativity in relation to her social self, since creativity 'cannot totally cut loose from the social whole' (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 7). In a rapidly changing society, Flora Nwapa's creativity agency was embedded in 'an entire field of relationships' that were similarly 'entangled and mutually responsive' in the cultural improvisation

of everyday social life (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 7). This social analysis seems to resonate with what Flora Nwapa herself stated: 'I'm an ordinary woman who is writing about what she knows' (Flora Nwapa, cited in Umeh 1995, 27).

A closer look at dedications in Flora Nwapa's published works is instructive of the social relations surrounding her literary production, especially the centrality of family, friends and colleagues. Her first novel, *Efuru* (1966), was dedicated to her uncle: 'To the memory of A.C. Nwapa', and her second novel, *Idu* (1970), paid tribute to her parents: 'For Papa and Mama.' Her children's book *Mammywater* (1979) was 'Dedicated to my Children: Amede, Uzoma & Ejine'. The collection of short stories *Wives at War* (1980) expresses her gratitude: 'For my husband Gogo, whose generosity made the establishment of Tana Press Limited possible.' *Cassava Song & Rice Song* (1986), Flora Nwapa's only poetry collection, was published 'To the memory of Ma Ukebia', her maternal grandmother. These family relations were clearly important to Flora Nwapa, as recognized throughout her literary career. But friendship and professional relations were also significant, linked to different people and places in her academic and administrative career. *This Is Lagos* (1971) was 'For Clara & A.Y', while her two plays *Conversations* (1993) and *The First Lady* (1993) were dedicated to 'For Zaynab, Kujara, Anthonia and others who made my stay in the University of Maiduguri a most memorable one' and 'For Ajie & Azumdialo', respectively.[21]

Interestingly enough, two books were dedicated to women, thus conveying her womanist perspective. The novel *Women Are Different* ([1992] 1986) was dedicated to women in general, 'For women…who are different' and the novel *One Is Enough* ([1992] 1986) to women around the world: 'For all women of the world, I repeat an Hausa proverb: A woman who holds her husband as

[21] Chief A.Y. Eke and his wife Clara were Flora Nwapa's long-time friends. A.Y. was her boss as the chief registrar at the University of Lagos; Zaynab Alkali and others were lecturers at the University of Maiduguri, where Flora served as a creative writing lecturer; and Ajie Upkabi Asika and his wife Chinyere Asika were Flora Nwapa's long-time friends. Ajie was the administrator of East Central State (1970–75), while Flora served as a commissioner in his cabinet. Source: Uzoma Nwakuche, pers. comm., 13–14 May 2020.

a father, dies an orphan.' The emphasis on women being different is instructive of appraisals of gender difference in African womanism, which recognizes that 'Female power is and should always be different from male power; it is needed for world progress' (Ogunyemi 1996, 61). This difference is by no means an excuse for gender inequality but an affirmation of gender complementarity, since both are required for societal progress. By addressing women in general, these dedications also illustrate the cosmopolitan orientation of Flora Nwapa's creolized aesthetics, as does the sharing of a Hausa proverb with readers around the world.

Significantly, Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* ([1975] 1986) was dedicated to the Lake Goddess: 'For the mysterious and beautiful…Uhamiri.' Published almost a decade after *Efuru*, and being the first war novel written by an African woman, this dedication is by all means remarkable. Not only did Flora Nwapa take a clear political stand against the war, but in her fictitious rendering of the horrors of civil war, she also invoked the powers of the Lake Goddess as the ultimate saviour of life, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Interestingly enough, *Never Again* is often read as the most autobiographical of Flora Nwapa's novels. In her analysis of *Never Again*, Ogunyemi argues that the lead character, Kate, is Flora Nwapa's 'alter ego' because, 'for the first time in her writing career, the writer is dealing with firsthand experiences rather than retelling communal rememories' (Ogunyemi 1996, 166). Similarly, noting that is the first and only time that Nwapa 'uses the auto-biographical mode', and 'imbues it with authenticity and clarity', Ezeigbo argues that 'There is every indication that Nwapa assumes the identity of author, narrator and heroine in the novel' (Ezeigbo 1998b, 478–9). She even refers to Flora Nwapa's daughter Ejine Nzeribe's unpublished article 'Remembrances of the War Period' to substantiate her claim, noting instances of intertextuality and concluding that 'Ejine has "recorded" the events of the war while Nwapa has "recreated" and "transmuted" it into fiction' (Ezeigbo 1998b, 479–80). Seeing that Flora Nwapa was pregnant and gave birth to her only son, Uzoma Nwakuche, during the war, the interlinkages with her own life come across as quite intricate, pointing to the relationality of creative agency, literary worldmaking and social life. But, since her own parents, children of the

first Christian converts in Oguta, abhorred what they considered to be pagan worship of Uhamiri, Nwapa's literary engagements with the divine mother also speak to the politics of her literary worldmaking.

As indicated in these dedications, Flora Nwapa's social worlds constituted a meshwork of social relations, and the dedications are instructive of the value she placed on these relationships, from her family in Oguta to friends and colleagues in places like Lagos and Maiduguri. These nodes in her social networks were in turn enmeshed in other social webs, some of them intertwined with her social worlds, others expanding well beyond them. At the core of her social world was the Oguta community she grew up in, a social collective that traces its history to migration from the Benin kingdom in pre-colonial times, with an intricate social organization of patrilineages (clans), and social constellations like age groups and (traditionally) polygamous, intergenerational households (Jell-Bahlsen 2008, 2014). While Flora Nwapa herself came from one of Oguta's most prominent families, and her acquisition of the title of Ogbuefi testified to her influence and accomplishments (Umeh 2010), her social life intersected with people of different ages, classes and genders, which she depicted in her aesthetic worlds. Ezeigbo has underlined the aesthetic value of 'Nwapa's perfect control of local color, tonal inflections in dialogue, and rhythms of rural lifestyle in all their complexities', especially the 'speech rhythms and mannerisms of Igbo rural women' (1998b, 68). She has concluded that it was 'her creative delineation of these characters that largely defines her significant linguistic and stylistic contribution to African fiction' (Ezeigbo 1998a, 68). But, in addition to capturing her experiences of everyday life in Oguta as well as the many stories she heard while growing up, Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worlds also depicted the many social worlds she immersed in throughout her life long professional career, not to mention the social worlds she got acquainted with through her social relations as well as events unfolding in Nigeria, as well as the world at large. All these social relations formed her social self as an African woman, a collective identity that included her sacred relation with the Lake Goddess Uhamiri.

I have dwelled on these dedications to reiterate the relational ontology of Nwapa's aesthetic worldmaking, encompassing the many worlds that intertwined in her social worlds, especially spiritual worlds, which are often overlooked in materialist-oriented scholarship. Focusing on the production of art objects, Gell viewed art as a technical system, which he defined as a *technology of enchantment*, to capture 'the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form' (Gell 1992, 44). While enchantment could open up interesting analyses of aesthetic worldmaking, Gell moved in the opposite direction, insisting on methodological philistinism, which he argued to be as important for the study of art as methodological atheism was for the study of religion, since the problem with aestheticism was that 'we have sacralized art: art is really our religion' (Gell 1992, 42). Unfortunately, his materialist conceptualization of art was no less ethnocentric than the aestheticism he critiqued, while his appraisal of technical virtuosity was disturbingly masculinist. By contrast, Hayot charts out an alternative to the materialist obsession in world literature studies (see also Cheah 2008, 2014), focusing on 'human imagination' (Hayot 2012, 41). Unfortunately, Hayot is silent on religion and spirituality. Meanwhile, even though Sansi's analysis has the enchanting title *The Idle Goddess* (Sansi 2018), there is no mention of spirituality in his discussion on relationality in contemporary art, which traces the ontological turn in anthropology to relational anthropology (e.g. Strathern 1988, 1998). Paying attention to Hayot's focus on cultural imagination, perhaps African womanism can help us activate Sansi's idle goddess.

Flora Nwapa's literary works mediated female agency as well as sacred power, thus conveying a liberating cosmovision of womanist worldmaking. In his discussion of relational ontologies and cosmovisions, Escobar valorizes 'a cosmology of liberation that is attuned to a kind of spirituality appropriate to current planetary conjectures', noting that the 'consideration of spirituality in many TDs [transition discourses] is a reminder of the systematic exclusion of this important area from our secular academies' (Escobar 2018, 70–71). Spiritualized cosmovisions have a direct bearing on ways of knowing, since approaching 'the spiritual as

epistemological' brings forth the process of 'knowing self through Spirit' (Alexander 2005, 293). Focusing on 'spiritual work', we can also appreciate 'the personal as spiritual', while acknowledging that 'the spiritual is no less social than the political' (Alexander 2005, 295–6). Womanism is a case in point, a social change perspective that is explicitly 'spiritualized', its acknowledgement of the intertwinement of the spiritual realm, human life and the material world resembling the 'spiritualized politics' of some social justice movements (Phillips 2006, xxvi).

From the perspective of African womanism, we can thus appreciate the spiritual work and spiritualized politics in Flora Nwapa's literary worldmaking, from cosmologies of divine complexity and storytelling that draws on oracular powers to matricentric articulations of communal solidarity and gender complementarity, inspired and guided by ancestral spirits and other spiritual forces that are intertwined with the natural environment (Ogunyemi 1996). This meshwork of relations makes the lasting value of Flora Nwapa's literary work quite remarkable:

> Similar to Efuru, who dedicated her life as a priestess to Ogbuide, the Lake Goddess, Flora Nwapa too, devoted her life to honoring Ogbuide and her children, especially the women, by putting their lives in print, thus ensuring their posterity beyond Ugwuta and into the annals of world literary history (Umeh 2001, 347).

Digital incarnations and infinite fame

By invoking Flora Nwapa, I also wish to show how digital media expands fame into the online realm, mediating immortality through digital incarnations. By conceptualizing Flora Nwapa's online presence in terms of digital incarnations, I hope to illustrate how 'cyberture', as in digitally mediated virtual reality, can 'enhance or disrupt the wealth of human spirituality' (Thiong'o 2014, 77). In conjunction with the Efuru@50 event, Flora Nwapa's name spread online, through the event website, the media coverage, the online distribution of presentations, and the digital release of the 50th anniversary edition of *Efuru*. On 21 April 2016, Ejine Nzeribe published an entry in the Dangerous Women project, entitled 'Flora Nwapa. Pioneering Nigerian Administrator,

Academic and Author' (Nzeribe and Okereke 2016).[22] In addition, the Nigerian writer and filmmaker Onyeka Nwelue made a documentary film about Flora Nwapa, *The House of Nwapa* (2016), which was promoted in social media and a trailer on YouTube.[23] The film was shortlisted for the prestigious African Movie Awards in 2016, in the documentary film category. In October 2017, I also released the documentary film *Efuru@50* on YouTube.[24]

On 13 January 2017, Flora Nwapa was honoured with a Google Doodle, *Flora Nwapa's 86th Birthday*, which expanded her online fame even further. The date marked what would have been Flora Nwapa's 86th birthday, and the doodle on Google's search page was illustrated with an image of an African woman handing out books with untitled blue covers in a savannah-like field of books, her head wrap matching her long-sleeved dress and earrings. The descriptive doodle text ascertained Flora Nwapa's fame, spreading her name to millions of Google users worldwide: 'Today's Doodle pays homage to Nwapa, known as the "mother of modern African literature," on what would be her 86th birthday.'[25]

On 5 May 2020, the online article 'Flora Nwapa: Mother of Modern African Literature' was published on the Deutsche Welle website, along with an animation of Flora Nwapa's lifework.[26] Written by Sam Olukoya, the article summarized Flora Nwapa's life, the themes of her novels, her most notable novels and her legacy, while querying her perspective on feminism and women's rights. The article also featured a short computer animation, *The Mother of Modern African Literature* by Gwendolin Hilse, which

[22] http://dangerouswomenproject.org/2016/04/21/flora-nwapa, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

[23] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7nbS4et_dU, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

[24] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EndOXak9ESQ, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

[25] https://www.google.com/doodles/flora-nwapas-86th-birthday, last accessed on 18 May 2020

[26] https://www.dw.com/en/flora-nwapa-mother-of-modern-african-literature/a-53197517?fbclid=IwAR3EOGDaNrb5iXYfc1SAfaU_UnXyopDnFKRftzB5zCCx4Ch6OjYmN8rPqMk, last accessed on 18 May 2020.

was published on the site a few weeks earlier, on 21 April 2020.[27] The animation portrays Flora Nwapa at different stages of her life, visually illustrating her lifework and achievements, with short subtitles capturing essential aspects of her life story, to the soundtrack of music. The animation concludes with words evoking Flora Nwapa's immortality: 'She remains an inspiration for many female African writers.'

Flora Nwapa also has her own online presence through a Facebook page.[28] Flora Nwapa's son, Uzoma Nwakuche, set up the page in August 2016, in preparation for the Efuru@50 event. Currently (May 2020), the page has 2,076 likes and 2,082 followers. The profile photo is the same portrait photo that was used for the Efuru@50 logo, a smiling Flora Nwapa with a raised cup in her hand, her alert eyes peering through cat-eye framed glasses, and her dimpled face framed by a stylish head wrap. The page also displays portrait photos of Flora Nwapa at different ages and covers of new releases of *Efuru* and *The Lake Goddess*, thus portraying her visual identity as a female writer (Uimonen 2013). Photos of events are also posted, from the Efuru@50 celebration in Nigeria and the African Literature Association conference in the US to the Stockholm Literary Fair in Sweden, along with citations from Flora Nwapa and descriptions of her work.

'Mama You Are Living,' a person commented on Flora Nwapa's Facebook page in August 2016, shortly after the page was set up. The comment captures how digitally mediated sociality ascertains Flora Nwapa's immortality, in seemingly everlasting online worlds.

Research has shown that it is quite common that people communicate with the dead through social media, especially Facebook (Moreman and Lewis 2014; Lagerkvist 2015; Staley 2014). Such practices have been discussed in terms of 'techno-spirituality' or 'digital religion', to denote 'the integration of offline and online religious practices', including beliefs about afterlife, typically in relation to Christian theological imagination (Staley 2014, 14).

[27] https://www.dw.com/en/the-mother-of-modern-african-literature/av-53197359, last accessed on 18 May 2020.

[28] https://www.facebook.com/floranwapa, last accessed on 18 May 2020.

Lagerkvist focuses on experiential and existential dimensions of digital memory, viewing these 'socio-technological entanglements as breeding notions of a transcendent reality and of a posthumous existence' (2015, 192). While noting that digital memory cultures derive from 'diverse (and mixed) religious discourses', they 'tend to reaffirm beliefs about an afterlife' (Lagerkvist 2015, 192). She forwards the concept *netlore of the infinite* to capture notions of forever among digital media users, while recognizing that the infinite has many variations (Lagerkvist 2015, 193). As a digital anthropologist, I would like to add some cultural variation to this emerging scholarship on digitality and (im)mortality, which is a topic I have touched upon elsewhere in relation to digital visuality and mourning rituals (Uimonen 2015). Since netlore is a digital version of folklore, and by extension can be seen as a genre of cyberture (Thiong'o 2014, 85), we can turn to Nigerian female storytellers to explore variations in digital infinity, capturing cultural perspectives that encompass reincarnation and cyclical time.

Drawing on Igbo/Oguta cosmology, I interpret Flora Nwapa's digital afterlife in terms of digital incarnations. You may recall Cecilia Ezeilo's words at the Efuru@50 celebration in Enugu, citing the writer Jorge Luis Borges: 'when writers die they become books, which is, after all, not too bad an incarnation.' This expression captures the embodiment of a spirit in earthly form, in this case the spirit of a writer in material literary objects, thus putting an artistic spin on Christian theology. But, since Flora Nwapa also embodied Igbo/Oguta cosmology, as expressed in her writings, there is something to be said for other forms of incarnation. As noted by Jell-Bahlsen,

> Contrary to Christian beliefs and Western thinking, many African worldviews including the Igbo perceive the soul as indestructible, moving in an eternal cycle of life through circular time and reincarnation. An individual may eventually be reborn, when the departed *chi* returns to earth in another human body. (2014, 31)

From this cultural perspective, the comment 'Mama You Are Living' captures Flora Nwapa's indestructible soul, years after she joined her ancestors.

From a womanist perspective, Flora Nwapa's *chi*, her individual quintessence, is also the 'mother within', a 'feminine force [that] determines the important phases of each individual's life' (Ogunyemi 1996, 35–6). And, since Flora Nwapa was a female writer who grew up with stories told by generations of women, her *chi* was exceptionally powerful: 'Each storyteller, having learned by listening as a member of different audiences, is inspired by her *Chi/Ori* to tell a story' (Ogunyemi 1996, 42). Flora Nwapa's stories centred on women and female divinity, myths and beliefs reconfigured in literary form. In Ogunyemi's analysis, this form of storytelling constitutes an incarnation of female divinity: 'the myths not only serve as paradigms for fiction by Nigerian women; the writer also incarnates Mammywata' (Ogunyemi 1996, 34). As a gifted storyteller who incarnated female divinity through her books, Flora Nwapa can thus be seen as a life-giving 'foremother', a 'pathfinder or *Chinedu* (*Chi* who guides)' for succeeding generations (Ogunyemi 1996, 43).

Building on Igbo cosmology, I suggest that through digital incarnations, Flora Nwapa's *chi* becomes distributed in bits and bytes, digital reconfigurations of Africa's literary foremother. The Google Doodle ensures that the track record of the mother of modern African literature is digitally archived, inscribed in the world history of famous artists and pioneers. Through her Facebook page Flora Nwapa lives on in the online world, mothering her online community, while her books are reproduced and circulated in digital form.

In terms of the cultural framing of fame, Flora Nwapa's digital incarnations bring forth a whole new dimension to value transformation, expanding intersubjective spacetime into digital domains. As discussed throughout this monograph, Efuru@50 revived Flora Nwapa's literary legacy, a positive value transformation that circumvented the contraction of Flora Nwapa's fame by a world-literature system, which at the time of her pioneering accomplishments undervalued African female writers. The negative value transformations of the world-literature system could thus be countered, curtailed and overcome. Through her digital incarnations, the structural constraints are circumvented even further, assuring the infinite expansion of Flora Nwapa's fame.

In memoriam Cecilia Kato

> A poetess must never pass unsung. Fare thee well Cecilia Kato. You were the first female I proudly featured on Abuja Poetry Society way back then. You left us the refrain of love as a burden for the woman. Hmmm, we were to co-author an anthology, co-write a journal article, co-edit a volume of young female voices […] Dreams stilled by time; entombed in eternity. Rest on; fellow creative spirit, sister of the pen and UniAbuja intellectual of repute. (Lizi Ben-Iheanacho, Facebook, 23 March 2018)

It was upon reading Lizi's Facebook posting on 23 March 2018 that I learned of the sudden passing of Cecilia Kato, a poet I had interviewed in Abuja on 14 December 2016. Lizi posted the text above, accompanied by two images, one of a red rose, blighted and withered into blackness, the other one a photograph of Cecilia Kato, in an elegant outfit with a laced top, a long wrapped skirt in white, golden sandals, and her face framed by an elaborate head wrap.

On the same day, the *National Wire* featured the news: 'Dr. Cecilia Kato, Prominent UNIABUJA Lecturer Dies at 59.' The article displayed a large portrait photo of Cecilia Kato, gently smiling at the camera, dressed in an embroidered purple gown and a matching head wrap. The short text announced:

> The University of Abuja (UNIABUJA) community in Gwagwalada, FCT was on Monday thrown into mourning by the sudden death of one of its longest serving lecturers, Dr. (Mrs). Cecilia Kato. Dr. Kato, 59, was a lecturer in the English and African Literature and Gender Studies departments.
>
> According to a statement from her family, the late Kato was a well-known writer and gender advocate, Christian leader and respected mentor to generations of her students past and present.
>
> Notably, Kato published collections of poems, including *Desires*, and *Victims of Love* in which she lamented the state of Nigerian, nay African women.
>
> She was equally renown as an impassioned and outspoken speaker in her various public appearances at religious and circular [*sic*; read: secular] gatherings.
>
> Kato obtained degrees in English and Literary Studies from the University of Calabar and started her lecturing job at UNIABUJA (from where she also obtained her PhD) until her death.

> Dr. (Mrs.) Kato died on the morning of March 19 after a brief asthmatic attack.
>
> Reacting to Mrs. Kato's sudden passing, one of her children, Miss Ndi Kato, a social activist, founder of the Dinidari Foundation and an upcoming politician, said 'My mother was my heartbeat, my pillar, my rock. She taught me everything I knew and she was my role model.'
>
> 'It's a colossal loss,' said journalist and activist, Betty Abah, a younger friend of the deceased.
>
> 'Mrs. Kato was the liveliest, the friendliest and most generous person you can find in any gathering. Her laughter and enthusiasm were quite infectious. And she was quite brilliant. As a fellow mentee of Prof. Ebele Eko, our former lecturer at UNICAL, I formed an enriching friendship with her which lasted more than 15 years. I will certainly miss her. Our world is certainly diminished with the sudden and untimely passing of this wonderful soul,' she added.
>
> Kagoro, Kaduna State-born Mrs. Kato will be buried on March 28.
>
> She was survived by four children and nine grandchildren. (*National Wire*, 23 March 2018)[29]

Cecilia Kato was the last female writer I interviewed, so it seems befitting that her story concludes my expose of contemporary Nigerian women writers. Cecilia came to my hotel in Abuja on 14 December, and in my reflections I jotted 'outspoken, energetic lady'. When I first contacted Cecilia by email on 25 November, prior to my travel to Nigeria, she responded apologetically 10 days later, explaining, 'I am currently at the Writers' Residency Program on invitation by Dr Okediran. It is an exciting experience,' adding 'I will be in Abuja between 13–15 Dec. Welcome to Nigeria.' We arranged our meeting by texting over the phone, her warm and caring tone evident in her messages 'I should be back to Abuja by Sunday by God's grace' and 'Do have a beautiful night rest from the stress of travelling.' When we met, Cecilia kindly brought some gifts: garden eggs and a bottle of groundnuts, local snacks often served to guests, as well as her poetry collection *Desires* (Kato 1999). She had written a personal note inside the

[29] https://nationalwire.com.ng/dr-cecelia-kato-prominent-uniabuja-lecturer-dies-59, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

cover: 'So fortunate to have met you, Paula. Remain blessed. The Author, [signature].'

Born in Kagoro, Kaduna State, Cecilia Kato was ethnically Kagoro, Christian by faith. She explained that Kagoro was indigenously known as Gorok, but Hausa colonization renamed them Kagoro. In addition to her mother tongue, Gorok, she also spoke English and Hausa. Cecilia married young and had 'a good line up' of four children and eight grandchildren when we met. Her late husband, who passed away in 2014, was a senior accountant. Her parents were farmers of grain, cattle and honey. Cecilia went to public school, a type of school called Native Authority, for children whose parents could not afford missionary school, with Hausa and English as medium of instruction. In 1994, Cecilia got an MA in African poetry from the University of Calabar. When we met she was in the process of completing her PhD on African poetry at the University of Abuja. Cecilia had taken a step back from her PhD to support her children's schooling and mentioned proudly that her son was now a university lecturer.

Cecilia Kato was a poet and writer. She wrote mostly in English, poetry and some short stories; she had no stamina for novels, she explained. She wrote 'as a woman' and her content was 'problematic', she reflected. In her collection *Victims of Love* (Kato 1999), she wrote about women as victims of 'I love you':

> It is not any man in the street that will slap you or maltreat you; any man that makes you angry was first of all invited by you. So all of us are victims of 'I love you' and by telling somebody 'I love you,' it is like you have surrendered your *self* to the person […] and they take advantage of the fact that once a woman says 'I love you' she gives everything for that 'I love you' and the man takes it and wraps it up around him and does whatever he wants to do with it, because you first of all told him 'I love you.'

Cecilia laughed a bit to take the edge off her words, adding, 'This is also my attempt at expressing. A lot of these poems are very, very personal. There is no poem here that I cannot trace to a particular situation' – she lowered her voice – 'because I went through a turbulent marriage.' She made sure to add: 'I appreciate my husband. When I talk about these things it is not in dishonour of him in any way, not at all. We were all very young.' She was

also 'very politically conscious' in her writing, as exemplified by some of the very sensitive topics she addressed in *Desires* (Kato 1999). When *Victims of Love* came out, it did not create a stir, since it was 'woman's talk', but when *Desires* followed people said 'Oh, she writes like a man!' 'Are you serious?' Cecilia reflected rhetorically. 'Are you expecting that as a woman I should not know what is happening around me? That the only thing I should know is my kitchen, my bedroom and the other room, like my president said?' Some of the poems in *Desires* are very sensitive political statements, others address social problems. During our interview Cecilia read one of the poems in *Desires*, 'The Burukutu Song', her voice rhythmically enunciating each word. 'It's a criticism of getting drunk, or doing anything in excess,' she reflected when she was done, with laughter in her voice.

In *Other People's Children and Other Stories* (Kato 2014), a collection of short stories, she wrote about children born out of wedlock during the civil war and other thorny issues. Self-published through AuthorHouse, Cecilia was hoping to republish the book locally. The book is featured on the Amazon online bookstore, where it is summarized as follows:

> The Nigerian Civil War left behind unsung heroes-women and children. Some of them had befriended soldiers to ensure the survival of their families. These children and others born out of wedlock constitute a community of people who have identity crises rocking their lives. Also, veterans of the war, abandoned by the authorities, were left as ordinary individuals to contend with the war's destructive impact. This is the focus of the title story, 'Other People's Children.' 'Homeless' captures the helplessness of isolated communities that are ill-prepared to battle the insurgency in northern Nigeria. 'Habiba's Triumph' tells of the phenomenon of forced marriages, even in literate families. Literacy, however, offers a victim the freedom of choice, which people of previous generations did not enjoy. 'Broken Lives' exposes the pain of broken relationships on college campuses. While a young man walks away unscathed to enter another relationship, a young woman is left to nurse the wounds for a lifetime. 'The People's Court' is a reflection of people's rush to Nigeria's capital city, Abuja, in search of greener pastures. Some leave home only to compete with rodents in settlements that are constantly demolished without adequate notice

or compensation by the authorities so as to ensure conformity to the city's master plan.[30]

'What informed my poetic background?' Cecilia laughingly replied in response to my last question.

'What else would you like me to ask you?'

'I come from a very poetic environment,' she proceeded to explain. 'I was born very close to the hills, the plateau hills, the range pass through Kagoro.' She painted a vivid picture of the 'very lovely' boundary of hills, remembering how 'you wake up in the morning, the first thing you think about is to go to the stream', 'a very natural environment' with 'water as cold as [snaps the glass on the table]', with lots of forest and fruits and vegetables in abundance. The environment grooms you naturally, she reflected. 'Those are the things I look at and I feel really grateful that from that background I can speak to the world and about the world,' merrily adding, 'I feel I am a little fortunate.'

As I listen to the recording of our interview, I hear a voice from the past, speaking in the present and sounding into the future. Cecilia's warm and confident voice, her accented pronunciation, her recurring laughter and characteristic giggle stream out of the speakers on my laptop. It is emotionally taxing to write this part of the book, yet it also feels particularly meaningful. By sharing Cecilia's story, I can contribute to her immortality, our relationality carrying her voice forward, thus expanding her cultural influence to future generations.

Let me conclude with one of Cecilia's poems in *Desires*, the 'Burukutu Song', to convey her creative spirit (Kato 1999, 34–6):

Burukutu Song

The other song in Sozato
Is the BKT song
BKT burukutu, barkatai, banza
BKT blocking our knowledge together
BKT young
BKT old

[30] https://www.amazon.com/Other-Peoples-Children-Stories-Collection/dp/1496997093, last accessed on 29 June 2020.

BKT burukutu morning and noon
BKT burukutu evening and night
BKT Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday
BKT Thursday and Friday and Saturday
BKT burukutu even on Sunday

BKT men
BKT women

Turning the giant into a dwarf
Making the villain into a coward
And snailing the swift
To swim in his vomit
BKT boys
BKT girls
Summoning the brain into a bowl
And leaving positions for other to mind

BKT burukutu barkatai banza
Draining the barns
Starving the soils
Weakening the heart
Of a man in a man
Breaking the homes
And stealing the peace

BKT literate
BKT illiterate
Taking the school
Off man that has schooled
Making Professors of men without letters
Displaying their folly
That others may see

BKT burukutu barkatai banza
Cowing the men
Boot-licking in yes-sir
Slaving the women in order to feed
Wooing the girls for babies at home
Testing hypothesis
Boy – fathering too soon

BKT burukutu barkatai banza
Helping to drive
Driving to death
Befriending an enemy in order to drink
Signing his document
With eyes on the blues
So much for friendship
So much for drink
BKT
Battering our knowledge together

BKT ruler
BKT ruled
Lets drink they say
To forget our problems
Drink and drink
The problems are waiting

> Lets drink they say
> To keep our tradition
> Drink and drink
> Tradition has gone
> Gone to the cities
> Gone with the west

Lets drink they say
It makes us feel good
Good you may feel
For only a moment
Sooner or later
The bad overtakes

Lets drink they say
Its never a sin
Drink and drink
With moral decaying
Of prayers unsaid
And children untrained

Lets drink they say
For what can we do

The rich get richer
The poor get poorer
Drink and drink
The sooner you die
Neither a poorer
Nor richer, nor living

Lets drink they say
We can't buy the bottles
So much the better
The bottles are dearer
Drink and drink
The pockets are drier
The liver decaying
And chemist a wonder

But what can we do
We never can stop
Colour your lips
With salt and pepper
And sap from a cactus
Or better with acid
If never you may
Then sure may you stop
Basketing your knowledge
Together away
With BKT
Burukutu barkatai banza

6. Sacred Waters in Oguta

Urashi river, writers' residence and chewy snails

The river flowed gently, curving its way through the lush vegetation of palm trees and thick bush. I asked the young man driving the small boat to cut the engine for a while so we could appreciate the silence, as the boat floated gently on the river. The only sounds surrounding us were the chirping of birds and buzzing of insects, hidden in the forest. Tree branches dipped into the river and clusters of pretty purple water lilies floated gently on the surface. The water was brown, pleasantly warm to the touch. I shifted to the front of the boat, curling up on the small sitting area under the railing. My travel companions sat on the wooden benches, some water splashing under their feet, the driver at the back, expertly steering the boat.

Urashi river was a magical experience, and as we slowly made our way down the river my spirit filled with joy, feeling more alive than I had in quite a while. One of the most beautiful sceneries I had experienced unfolded around me and I was taking it all in, embracing life with all my being. The serenity of the river and the lushness of the riverbanks stirred something deep inside of me, a spiritual well-being. I said a quiet thank you to my loved ones who had passed on; I could feel their presence and appreciation, sharing my exultation.

'That is a gunboat; it has remained here since the war.' Uzoma pointed to the flat top of a sunken boat, lined with water lilies. 'See: peace will always prevail over war,' I responded, while taking pictures of the rusty remains of the war machine, now overtaken by the powers of nature. Little did I know at the time

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what the gunboat signified, as told in the story of how Ogbuide saved Oguta during the civil war by sinking the enemy's gunboat in the river.[31]

At the confluence of Oguta lake and Urashi river the brown water mixed with clearer blue water. There is a shrine at that place, I was told later on, but I did not see it as we passed, my eyes focused on the vegetation and the occasional canoe passing by, loaded with fire wood and paddled by men and women.

The lake was divine; no wonder people worshipped the Lake Goddess. I was immersed in a natural setting that invoked a supernatural presence; the beauty of the lake and its adjoining rivers, the richness of the water flowing through, the luxuriance of the vegetation along the lakeside. It was a magic place, a tactile expression of spirituality.

We slowly made our way back to the lake, crossing to the other side of town, passing small villages along the lake shore. Low houses along unpaved roads leading down to the lake, sadly with heaps of garbage. Uzoma had made an effort to clean the garbage in his village, he told me. It was all really nice for a year, but the villagers did not maintain it. He was hoping for funding at some point to continue the effort until the villagers could sustain it.

Our boat went down another river, passing some children playing in the water, splashing and waving their arms when they saw us. Women were washing clothes in the river, while keeping an eye on their children. We passed a small plot of land that belonged to Flora Nwapa's heirs, nestled along the riverbanks, overlooking the lake, a perfect place for a house.

We returned to the pier, now teeming with activity: a small ferry loaded with passengers and vehicles heading to the other side of the lake. We disembarked from our little boat and took off our shoes so we could take the few steps in shallow water to reach the shore. I looked back, taking in the lake, before we headed back to the car.

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[31] The story of how Ogbuide sunk the gunboat is well known among members of the Oguta community; it is also well documented in anthropological accounts and featured in Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (e.g. Jell-Bahlsen 1998; Nwapa [1975] 1986).

'Paula, you are glowing!' Ejine remarked when we entered the sitting room, 'I have just fallen in love' I replied, adding 'must be the Goddess in the lake.' We had returned to Chief Christopher Nwapa's house, a magnificent two-storey building with a large veranda upstairs. We had met Ejine at the house in the morning over a sumptuous breakfast, the uncle gracefully serving us coffee in dainty porcelain cups, while the sound of classical music streamed through the open windows. I had marvelled at the view, thinking how it must have inspired Flora Nwapa at the time, such a tranquil setting near the lake. Beyond the large compound I could observe some women moving around their houses, smoke from their cooking gently drifting in the air, the kind of everyday scene that Nwapa described in her writings. We had driven through the Nwapa family plantation to get to the house, acres of palm oil trees. The large family house, with its tall pillars at the entrance, whispered the wealth of old money, a visual manifestation of the sophistication of one of Oguta's elite families.

Chief Christopher Nwapa was in high spirits, excitedly talking about the book he was writing, on political leadership in Nigeria (C. Nwapa 2017). He spoke of historical events and political figures with great familiarity, revealing insights gleaned from proximity to power. When I mentioned the importance of writing the history of nation-building, he remarked that it had already been written and showed me Chinua Achebe's book *There Was a Country*. His own book had been delayed due to the passing of his wife. His children had advised him to wait for a year before publishing it, thus giving him time to mourn. Large portraits of his late wife were on display throughout the house, and a large commemorative poster was hanging at the entrance gate. It was clear that the loss of his wife was still a heavy burden; he had mentioned her passing in his public statements in Enugu and Owerri, and again in this small family gathering.

As we drove around town, Ejine showed us the writer's residence she was building, in honour of her mother. It was a spacious house, built on a small plot of land in town. Most of the walls had been erected, along with a tiled roof and aluminium-framed arched windows. The tiled entrance with two pillars led into a well-designed interior, with spacious sitting and dining areas,

a library and work areas. There were seven bedrooms of varying size, all of them with bathrooms. As we walked through the house, Ejine explained she was going to decorate the walls with covers of her mother's books and name the rooms after them. The house would serve as a writer's residence, especially for women writers, thus keeping up the legacy of Flora Nwapa. Upstairs Ejine was constructing a small apartment with a kitchenette and bathroom that she and her siblings could use when visiting Oguta. The house was not yet completed due to financial constraints. Even so, I was impressed by the investment Ejine had made, all out of her own pocket, without any financial sponsorship. What a selfless tribute to her mother.

While Uzoma and his friend Udom drove me through the streets of Oguta, they made sure to pass Amede Court, the matrimonial home where Flora Nwapa was buried. The riverside house was locked up and thus inaccessible. But I could see the grave in the courtyard, and, as I paused for a moment of reflection at the fence, my thoughts went to Flora Nwapa, a remarkable woman whom I felt I was getting to know better.

Flora Nwapa was not the only internationally known talent from Oguta and I was soon to discover an unexpected connection to Sweden, Dr Alaban. As we drove through a residential area, Uzoma and Udom drove to a large house overlooking the river. From the outside, I could see a spacious veranda facing the river and a huge arched window in the upstairs wall. 'This is Dr. Alban's house!' Udom exclaimed excitedly. 'He lives in your country.' I was astonished. I had no idea that Dr. Alban, known for international hits like 'Hello Afrika', 'It's My Life' and 'Sing Hallelujah', came from Oguta! What a small world indeed. Later on I found out that Dr. Alban's full name is Alban Uzoma Nwapa, a name that clearly roots him in Oguta.[32]

[32] On 14 April 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Alban shared 'Hello Sverige' on YouTube. It became an instant hit, with over 340,000 views within four days of release. 'Dr. Alban – Hello Sverige' is a new version of Dr. Alban's song '10 små moppepojkar' (1990). This song was made with regard to the current coronavirus pandemic. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vE-dIBOl3iQ, last accessed on 18 May 2020.

In the afternoon, Uzoma's relative Florence brought us a local delicacy: snails. She had explained the evening before how carefully she prepared snails, cleaning them thoroughly before cooking them with hot pepper. She had brought us peppered fish soup for supper after our arrival in Oguta, a delicious soup that we had enjoyed under the canopy of a mango tree in the courtyard of uncle's guesthouse, where we were hosted. Curious about local delicacies, I had agreed to try snails. I washed down the chewy snails with gulps of cold Hero beer. I did not particularly enjoy the taste or texture, but it made for a good Facebook posting. Chief Christopher Nwapa joined us in the open bar of the guesthouse. I was delighted by his conversation; he spoke old-school English, with humorous expressions thrown in. Before returning to his house he remarked, 'Good company is what you need in life.' Right he was.

In the evening we made a courtesy call to Ernest Nwapa, Uzoma's in-law. In the afternoon we had passed the building site of his hotel, a large complex with modern facilities and fittings: lots of glass, tiles and chrome. Located right by the lakeside, it had a private sandy beach. The compound was quite large and Ernest drove me around in a golf cart. Ernest's private residence was no less impressive, a four-storey house right by the lake, centrally located near the pier. Ernest was clearly a powerful man, his acquisition of a former colonial building attesting to his social position in Oguta town. We walked up many staircases until we reached the top floor where Ernest was relaxing in a spacious sitting room, sitting in a bulky leather armchair, watching a large-screen TV. He offered a wide selection of drinks; Florence and I opted for champagne. Although it was night-time, I could imagine the view from the terrace overlooking the lake. We enjoyed Ernest's hospitality for a while, before heading back to the guesthouse for some sleep, to get ready for our early-morning departure, driving all the way back to Abuja.

Female divinity in *The Lake Goddess*

I received *The Lake Goddess* by express mail from Nigeria, just a week after Uzoma sent it from Abuja end of November 2017. As

mentioned in Chapter 5, he had printed it for the annual conference of the Association of African Literature in June 2017. I asked Uzoma to send me a copy so that I could read it before finalizing this book. The novel arrived a few days before my departure from Sweden to Tanzania. It was a hardback version, illustrated with the portrait of a woman wearing a head wrap, the cover designed by Aquila Brisca, the portrait inspired by Mfoniso Etofia, a Nigerian model. Uzoma had kindly signed the novel 'with great compliments'. As soon as I reached my house in Bagamoyo, I read *The Lake Goddess*, carefully taking notes of key aspects. It was only after completing the novel that I realized it was exactly a year ago, 10 December, that I had visited Oguta. What a coincidence! Or maybe not.

As I resumed the writing of this book, *The Lake Goddess* paved the way. It had been three months since my last period of writing and I had reached as far as Owerri. I now resumed my writing, focusing on Oguta. Even though I only spent two nights in Oguta on my first visit, the small lakeside town made a deep imprint on me. Perhaps it was the size; I prefer quaint little towns over bustling cities and Oguta reminded me of Bagamoyo, my hometown in Tanzania. Perhaps it was the lake and rivers, I have always been drawn to water and my house in Bagamoyo overlooks the Indian Ocean. But I know within my inner self that something else was going on: Oguta touched me spiritually, through sacred waters.

In *The Lake Goddess*, Flora Nwapa returned to the cultural core of the Oguta community, centring on the female deity Ogbuide, whose powers were professed through the main character, Ona. It is a captivating story. Flora Nwapa's narrative voice carries the power of her ancestors, her cultural heritage amplified by her political astuteness, feminine insight and sense of humour, while her womanist gaze is sharper than ever. While her earlier writings on Uhamiri were mostly based on 'stories and hearsay rather than on first-hand ritual or religious experiences', by the time she wrote *The Lake Goddess* Flora Nwapa had experienced her 'first encounter with the Eze Mmiri, a renowned priestess of Uhammiri', who had felt 'honored' by the 'personal visit from the world-famous writer' (Jell-Bahlsen 1998, 634). At the time, the worship of Ogbuide and Urashi was vibrant, with elaborate rituals for the water deities,

and water societies that attracted many followers with their gaiety and prestige, led by respected priests and priestesses, as shown in the documentary film *Mammy Water* (Jell-Bahlsen 1990). Although many people in Oguta 'ascribe[d] Nwapa's professional success to *their* Lake Goddess', Flora Nwapa had 'refused the priestess's 1990 request to perform a major sacrifice of a cow to Ogbuide/Uhammiri, because of her Christian background, upbringing, and social standing', as Nwapa told Jell-Bahlsen during a visit to New York in 1991 (Jell-Bahlsen 1998, 653, fn 5). But, through her literary worldmaking, Nwapa told a more deviant story.

After the opening lines, 'Mgbada was the first son of his father who was a medicine man and a diviner. Tradition demanded that he would inherit his father's skills,' the story of *The Lake Goddess* unfolds slowly (Nwapa 2017, 14). As we get acquainted with Mgbada, we learn that he was baptized Joseph and went to church and school like others in his age grade, but he continued to worship the ancestors. When he was 23 years old he married Maria, who he called Akpe. His mother made arrangements with the girl's mother, her namesake Mama Theresa, a devout Catholic just like her daughter. The couple was married through a traditional and a church wedding. Mgbada combined his teaching job with his work as a medicine man and diviner, skills that were appreciated in his community. Ten months after the wedding, the couple was 'blessed with a bouncing baby boy' (Nwapa 2017, 46). Akpe had two more children. Then Ona arrived, a seemingly normal girl, but diviners had told Mgbada that the girl would be different: 'Your child will be a strange child' (Nwapa 2017, 64). The pregnancy lasted for 11 months and, when the baby was born, 'she seemed displeased with everything around her', as if she did not want to enter the world, and her eyes were 'not the eyes of a baby born moments ago' (Nwapa 2017, 67). The father named her Ona: precious jewel.

Ona grew up different from other children, always drawn to the lake. Before she was two years old she could swim out into the deep and her siblings called her a fish. When her mother warned her about swimming too far, to be careful of the Woman of the Lake, the spirit named Ogbuide or Uhamiri, Ona declared,

'I want to live with her' (Nwapa 2017, 72). As she grew up, Ona behaved even more strangely, sometimes disappearing, and talking about meeting with Ogbuide, conveying her messages. The mother sent Ona to a Catholic convent to force the 'child of the devil' to repent, but 'Ona hated the convent from the first day' (Nwapa 2017, 82). She resisted everything she was taught and did not eat much. After 18 months the father brought her home. She was sent to school, but spent most of her time fishing, which she excelled at.

To everyone's surprise, Ona got married to Mr Sylvester, a well-to-do trader from another town, thus a 'foreigner'. Ona was a young, beautiful woman who tried to please her husband, while the family kept quiet about her strangeness. The marriage progressed well and Ona gave her husband 'three children in nearly five and a half years. That was a record,' but she was baffled by all the fuss people made about the children: 'she did not care one way or the other' and wondered '[d]id she not possess the instincts of a mother?' (Nwapa 2017, 157).

Over time it became clear that Ona had been called by Ogbuide and she moved back to her father's compound, where she built three huts for herself. Her daily routines were dictated by Ogbuide and she worked very hard, devoting her life to serving the Lake Goddess and, through her powers, the community at large.

From the outset, religious clashes between traditional beliefs and modern Christianity are brought to the fore, but, as expressed through Ona's destiny and the insights of her father, the author takes a stand in defence of local culture. Christian fanaticism is portrayed in all its folly, through characters like the 'mean, hard and evil' Madam Margaret at the convent, who prays six times a day and washes a statue of the Virgin Mary at the church every Saturday, praising Jesus Christ. 'The ritual amused Ona greatly' and she 'wondered why Madam Margaret omitted the name of Maria, the mother of Jesus', pondering whether it was 'a kind of discrimination' (Nwapa 2017, 89). By contrast, Ona's father, the diviner, maintains both Christian and traditional beliefs, 'I handle the two religions well. To me, none clashes with the other' (Nwapa 2017, 138).

Ogbuide is valorized as the mother of the Oguta community, a female deity whose spiritual presence is known to all, yet who can

only be seen by a select few. When the father consults the diviners after Ona has sighted Ogbuide, he explains to the family, 'There is nothing we can do,' adding 'We cannot fight against Our Mother.' They ask: 'Our Mother? Uhamiri? Ogbuide?' adding 'Eze nwanyi? Eze miri?' 'She answers to these names,' Mgbaba responds. 'She is one and the same spirit' (Nwapa 2017, 153).

Ogbuide is described as a kind spirit, whose priestesses are not allowed to do any harm. When praising her, Ogbuide is called mother of all mothers, queen mother, good mother, protector of women and the Lake People. Although reluctant about losing his wife to the goddess, even her husband recognizes that Ona's calling is a 'gift', not a sign of 'madness' (Nwapa 2017, 170), as the father explains to him that Ona cannot refuse her call, since 'refusal means disability or death', while acceptance means 'security, power, and peace' (Nwapa 2017, 191).

The Lake Goddess is visualized in all her splendour through the eyes of Ona, when she enters the underwater abode of the Woman of the Lake, who first appears as a tall shadow (Nwapa 2017, 167):

> As it approached, it took another form. It was no longer a shadow but a woman. Yes, a woman. She was naked except for the hundreds of strings of coral beads around her waist. She had two strings of coral beads on both wrists, and hundreds around her neck. Down to her navel, water was dripping from her wet hair, yet she was not wet. She held a gold staff of office in her right hand. […]
>
> Then she said, 'It has taken you a very long time to come.' She smiled and touched my right shoulder with her staff. 'Welcome to my abode,' she said. She continued, 'I have waited for a long time for you to be my priestess. I have chosen you. I want you but I don't want to force you nor hurry you. Don't wait too long. Give this message to the man who lives with you: Tell him you belong to me.

As Ona follows her calling, her everyday life as a priestess, now called Ezemiri, Queen of Water, is described in great detail. She only wears red or white, and she has to observe a great many rituals and taboos. She sacrifices to Ogbuide, prays, fasts and sings. Her duty is to help people with their problems, through powers vested in her by Ogbuide. The novel ends with Ona singing her praises, invoking the lake Goddess (Nwapa 2017, 206):

Ogbuide, we thank you
Queen of Water, we thank you
Great Mother, we thank you
Good and kind Mother
Come closer
Mother and water are the same
Without water
Who can live?
Without Mother
Who can live?
Our beautiful Mother
Come closer

Creativity and intertextuality in Flora Nwapa's oeuvre

> In *The Lake Goddess*, Nwapa leaves her testament for posterity, for here she bares her soul. Flora Nwapa still lives in her works, and we hear her still. (Helen Chukwuma, preface to *The Lake Goddess*).

> Flora Nwapa's 'womanism' recognizes firstly that a woman is a mother that nurtures and provides for her children.
>
> Secondly, a woman could be a wife that supports herself first, then her husband and children if she has any.
>
> Financial independence is the theme of Flora Nwapa's Womanism. She is financially independent whether or not she is married, single or divorced. (Uzoma Nwakuche, Flora Nwapa's son, back cover of *The Lake Goddess)*

In retrospect, Flora Nwapa's last novel completes a circle in her literary work, her oeuvre starting with *Efuru* and ending with *The Lake Goddess*. At the time, Flora Nwapa did not know it would be her last book and she had indicated to Uzoma that 'she would like to write more plays'.[33] Indeed, in 1993, the same year she died, Flora Nwapa published two plays through Tana Press, *The First Lady* and *Conversations*. But *The Lake Goddess* became her last novel, published posthumously, 25 years after completion.

Building on anthropological theory of art and creativity, Nwapa's oeuvre can be analysed in terms of a cumulative pro-

[33] WhatsApp chat with Uzoma Nwakuche, 10 December 2017.

cess of creative agency. Gell has suggested that an artist's oeuvre can be viewed as a spatiotemporally distributed object, a lineage of artworks that form a network of relationships (Gell 1998, 232–5). Early work is often an artistic projection of later work (protention), which in turn is an artistic retrospection of earlier work (retention). It is upon the completion of an artist's oeuvre that these relationships become clear, since the artwork can be assessed in its entirety. Gell looked at creative agency in terms of a cumulative process of modification, suggesting that an 'artist's oeuvre is artistic consciousness (personhood in the cognitive, temporal sense) writ large and rendered public and accessible' (Gell 1998, 236). This cognitive model of artistic work can be complemented with an approach to creative agency in terms of a social process of cultural improvisation (Hallam and Ingold 2007). It is a highly dynamic and interactive process, since 'the mind's creativity is inseparable from that of the total matrix of relations in which it is embedded and into which it extends, and whose unfolding is constitutive of the process of social life' (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 9).

This emphasis on the relationality of creative agency offers a productive complement to what literary scholars refer to as intertextuality. Scholars have noted that the intertextuality of a world literature novel like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is very complex – 'the novel's intertextuality is not restricted to any single tradition, language, or form' – and they conclude that 'not only the general polysemy of the term "literature" becomes evident, but also its diverse cultural, geographical and media-technological aspects' (Helgesson and Rosendahl Thomsen 2020, 3). As discussed throughout this monograph, the multiple meanings of literature become quite evident in Flora Nwapa's writings as well, especially when read through the lens of creolized aesthetics, from a globalectic perspective. When it comes to aesthetic worldmaking, both writers conveyed the relational ontologies of Igbo culture, while addressing the politics and cultural entanglements of coloniality. But Flora Nwapa's storytelling also diverted somewhat from Achebe's, offering a female perspective to complement his male perspective, while the intertextuality in her works also point to her womanist worldmaking.

The appearance of Efuru in *The Lake Goddess* offers an interesting example of creative intertextuality in Nwapa's oeuvre, a literary character now recast as a historical figure, whose life story is intertwined with Ogbuide. It is when two women fish-sellers, Mgbeke and Ekecha, discuss how the young woman Ona has been called by Ogbuide to become a priestess that Efuru is brought in (2017, 123–4):

> 'I would like to be called late in life, like Efuru was called,' said Mgbeke.
>
> 'Efuru, the good one, the daughter of Nwashike Ogene?'
>
> 'Who else? She was called late in life,' continued Mgbeke, 'after suffering indignities from her husbands. What else was left for her to do than be the priestess of Ogbuide? That's the time to be called.'

In establishing Efuru as a virtuous woman, 'the good one', she is also praised for how well she performed as a priestess, serving Ogbuide and the community:

> She gave dignity to the whole cult. She was the leader and every member of the cult from far and near respected her. She was always calm; always spoke in a slow and measured tone. She never raised her voice. She did not claim to do what she had no power to do. (Nwapa 2017, 124)

In hindsight, we can appreciate the centrality of femininity and spirituality in Nwapa's oeuvre, as exemplified by the intertextuality of Efuru and Ogbuide. The retention of Efuru in *The Lake Goddess* and the protention of *The Lake Goddess* in *Efuru* point to significant overlaps in Nwapa's literary production, her earlier work almost coming across as a prediction of her later work, thus validating Gell's theory on an artist's oeuvre as a distributed object (Gell 1998). But there is much more than an artist's extended mind at work. By portraying Efuru as a woman who lived in Oguta, Nwapa historicized her fictional character, embodying her in a web of social relations that extended across time. Yet this was not a static recollection of the past but a social commentary on the present, with a view to shaping the future. Through her creative agency, Flora Nwapa was not just describing Oguta culture in literary form; her fame also afforded her a position of cultural influence.

The recurrence of the Lake Goddess throughout Flora Nwapa's oeuvre has received considerable scholarly attention (e.g. Amadiume 1998; Jell-Bahlsen 2007, 2014; Nwankwo 1998; Ogunyemi 1996, 1995; Umeh 1998a). As discussed in this monograph, in *Efuru* (1966), the main character becomes a worshipper of the Woman of the Lake; in *Never Again* (1975) Uhamiri saves the Oguta community from military destruction; in *Mammywater* (1979) children are introduced to her spiritual world; and in *The Lake Goddess* (2017), Ogbuide even inspires the title of the novel. As noted by Jell-Bahlsen, 'Nwapa has throughout her oeuvre invoked the goddess, *Ogbuide*', using the 'powers and mysteries' of the Lake Goddess, 'to brighten women's path' (Jell-Bahlsen 2007, 260). Similarly, Ezeigbo has concluded that it is 'the goddess who provides Nwapa's fiction with structural and thematic unity and relevance' (1998b, 69). Describing Flora Nwapa as 'Uhamiri's daughter', Ogunyemi has emphasized how she ended her writing career 'dutifully returning to her religious beginnings with *The Lake Goddess*', which makes for an 'almost sacred text, a voice from beyond the grave' (Ogunyemi 1995, 9).

To capture the dynamics of creative agency, it is worth dwelling on some of the disjunctures in Nwapa's literary rendering of Oguta culture. Scholars familiar with Igbo and Oguta culture have emphasized that Nwapa's works portray local practices and beliefs with considerable accuracy: 'I find *The Lake Goddess* almost anthropological in its narrative on traditional culture and religion' (Amadiume 1998, 519). Meanwhile, Nwankwo has asserted that '*The Lake Goddess* is a work which looks back and edits, like a rewritten autobiography the crucial mis-steps in her creation of the many worlds which remake the Igbo material of her works' (Nwankwo 1998, 339). But what comes across as missteps from the perspective of a cultural authority like Nwankwo are recognized as artistic liberty by another cultural expert. As Jell-Bahlsen reflected in her paper 'Efuru@50: the Dialectics of Flora Nwapa',

> We must acknowledge the veracity of the insider novelist's insight. Yet, at the same time, a novelist voices her understanding differently from a historian, economist, political scientist, social scientist, folklorist, or ethnographer. A novel is a work of art, and the artist

> may take more artistic liberties than permissible for a social scientist or an ethnographer. (Jell-Bahlsen 2016, 7)

She also reiterated that 'ethnic fiction may contain a meta-text critical of the author's own culture, as illustrated by Flora Nwapa' (Jell-Bahlsen 2016, 7).

It is highly significant that Nwapa used her cultural influence to valorize indigenous African spirituality, which indicates the spiritualized politics of her womanist worldmaking. Through her feminine storytelling, Flora Nwapa engaged in gender politics as well as the politics of religion, especially the conflicts between Christianity and traditional religious beliefs and practices. By valorizing Ogbuide, while encouraging religious tolerance, Flora Nwapa took a stand for female divinity and indigenous cosmology that challenged the status quo. Reflecting on the resurrection of Ogbuide in Nwapa's *The Lake Goddess*, Jell-Bahlsen has concluded (2008, 393):

> In the changing world of contemporary Oguta, the goddess – and by extension (African) woman—is constantly pushed back and encroached upon by alien ideas, problems, and forces. Nevertheless, *The Lake Goddess* resurfaces at the end as a source of healing of madness, ultimately pointing to the universal values of spirituality and African culture.

This is why we should appreciate Flora Nwapa's oeuvre in relation to 'the dominant strain, the writer's concern for the larger community whose interest is superimposed upon her female politics' (Ogunyemi 1996, 134). When viewed from a womanist perspective, 'The "dominant" perspective in Nwapa's novels is communal/national rehabilitation; this encompasses the liberation of all the people from attitudes and practices that retard progress and the use of released energies for social and spiritual development' (Ogunyemi 1996, 134).

Through the lens of creolized aesthetics, we can appreciate that not only was Nwapa's story telling a community-oriented transition discourse but it also followed a social ethics and cosmopolitan orientation directed at the world at large, her womanist worldmaking offering inspiring glimpses into other worlds and other realities for humanity in general.

When it comes to world literature, Nwapa's literary works should be recognized as nothing less than revolutionary. When Flora Nwapa's oeuvre is analysed from a womanist angle, starting with her first novel '*Efuru*, more revolutionary than critics care to think', to her invocations of Ogbuide/Uhamiri, 'celebrated as a revolutionary archetype doubling as Nwapa's muse', the radical dimensions of her worldmaking can be ascertained (Ogunyemi 1996, 135, 140). With some ontological openness, we can also begin to appreciate the world-shattering dimensions of Flora Nwapa's womanist worldmaking. Indigenous researchers have pointed out that 'spiritual relationships to the universe' are not only 'difficult arguments for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept' but they also remain 'critical sites of resistance' (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 143). Creatively tackling the cultural shackles of patriarchal modernity and religious colonialism, while showing us another reality of human, natural and spiritual interdependence, it seems that half a century later Flora Nwapa's spiritualized storytelling still offers valuable contributions towards a decolonized world literature and the possibility of making a more balanced world.

Femininity and spirituality in one world literature

By invoking Flora Nwapa, we can now release some of the elusive *force* in world literature. In his efforts to define the reality of the world, Cheah suggests that 'a non-negative force that is intimately linked to literature constitutes the material world' (Cheah 2008, 34). He elaborates that:

> any given or present world, any world that we have received and that has been historically changed and that we self-consciously seek to transform through human activity, is driven by a force that we cannot anticipate but that enables the constitution of reality and any progressive transformation of the present world by human action. (Cheah 2008, 35)

He draws on Derrida, who describes this force as 'analogous to birth', explaining that, as much as '[f]amilies prepare for a birth', there is great uncertainty, since 'the child that arrives remains unpredictable; it speaks of itself as from the origin of another world,

or from an-other origin of this world' (Derrida 2002, cited in Cheah 2008, 35). Cheah points to how '[l]iterature communicates directly with this force because of its peculiar ontological status', and he describes literature in terms of 'the force of a passage, an experience, though which we are given and receive any determinable reality'. Thus, much more than just 'a product of human imagination or something that is derived from, represents, or duplicates material reality', he assesses the worldmaking power of world literature as 'a process that keeps live the force that opens up another world, a force that is immanent to the existing world' (Cheah 2008, 35–6). Farfetched as they may seem in their abstractions, I believe Cheah and Derrida are onto something, but their seemingly gender-blind theorizing can be enriched through some womanist insights.

Could it be that the immanent force that literature communicates with is the life-giving force of human worlds, which by all accounts is a maternal force? It is rather astonishing that scholars can discuss birth without mentioning mothers, but perhaps such oversights derive from the kind of discrimination that Ona noticed in Christian worshippers' omission of Jesus' mother in *The Lake Goddess* (Nwapa 2017, 89). As you may recall, at the outset of Efuru@50, Flora Nwapa's son stressed that 'when you talk about born, to be born, to bear; these are all words that are related to women. So you cannot talk about life without talking about woman.' Throughout her literary career, Flora Nwapa highlighted the centrality of motherhood and mothering, biologically, socially and spiritually. As a pioneering female writer, she had to correct fellow male writers, scholars and critics, who mistakenly undervalued women in their universalist claims. Over half a century later, it would seem high time to recognize that, without due consideration of women writers, scholarship will remain trapped in a rather one-sided mindset.

But there is something beyond the life-giving force of the mother; it is the divine force that channels the spirit of life through human bodies. While anthropologists and other social scientists have enthusiastically asserted that humans are social to the core, very few would dare to suggest that humans are spiritual to the core. But denying the spiritual essence of human life is like denying the reality of the majority of the world population who 'live the belief that their lives are intimately and tangibly paired to

the world of the invisible' (Alexander 2005, 327). These spiritualized worldviews are no less authentic than scientific explanations of reality; they just have different ontologies, and therefore different epistemological paths to the truth. By insisting on the spiritual core of humans as an ontological reality, I espouse the postulation that: 'The central understanding within an epistemology of the Sacred is that of a core/Spirit that is immortal, at once linked to the pulse and energy of creation' (Alexander 2005, 326). Moreover, this epistemological perspective means that 'constructs that constitute the praxis of the Sacred would thus have to be taken as *real* and the belief structure of its practitioners as *having effects that are real*' (Alexander 2005, 327, emphasis added). In our search for the force that literature communicates with, we should therefore pay far more attention to the reality of spirituality: 'Taking the Sacred seriously would mean coming to wrestle with the dialectic of *permanent impermanence*' (Alexander 2005, 327, emphasis added).

To capture these critical aspects of literary worldmaking, let me return to the notion of one world literature as an emergent pluriverse. As discussed in Chapter 1, in his philosophical deliberations on one world anthropology, Ingold describes the ontogenesis of the world as a conversation, emphasizing the world's incessant creation in terms of a continually emerging pluriverse (Ingold 2018, 169). He introduces the principle of interstitial differentiation to denote cultural difference as something that emerges from within, emphasizing becoming different (differentiation) rather than being different (diversity). Moreover, using the distinction between 'and' and 'with', he argues that the parts of the whole are 'not components that are added *to* one another but movements that carry on *alongside* one another' (Ingold 2018, 159–60). The principle of interstitial differentiation ties in well with African cultural ideals of gender complementarity, recognizing the shared humanity of men and women, while accommodating the fluidity of gender as a principle of social organization (see also Amadiume [1987] 2015; Nzegwu 2005). It also ties in with Igbo cosmology, which recognizes a supreme god or great spirit of creation and destiny, Chi-Ukwu/Chukwu, as well as personal *chi*, an individual life force or spirit derived from Chi-ukwu (Jell-Bahlsen 2014, 22). In addition to the gender-neutral great spirit, there is a pantheon

of female and male deities, nature divinities and ancestors, which are 'manifestations of the divine forces of nature, human achievements, and challenges' (Jell-Bahlsen 2014, 23). Among the forces of nature, two female deities can be singled out as 'existential and spiritual leaders': the supreme earth goddess (Ani/Ala) and the supreme water goddess (Nne Mmiri) (Jell-Bahlsen 2014, 23). We are thus dealing with a cosmovision that comes rather close to Ingold's philosophizing on one world as an emergent pluriverse.

More concretely, the image that comes to my mind is the confluence of the Oguta lake and Urashi river, flowing alongside one another, constituting not only water but also female and male divinity, the former a maternal life-giving force, the latter her spiritual husband. The lake and the river are in constant movement, just like the world is in ontological flux, always becoming, always in the making. Although they comprise different bodies of water, the lake and the river emerge from within nature, just like individual biological variation is immanent to humans. And regardless of how we conceive human worlds, humans communicate with the forces of nature, similarly to how literature communicates with the forces of life.

Figure 8. The confluence of Oguta lake and Urashi river. Photograph by author.

I am elaborating on Igbo cosmology to reiterate the relational ontology of Flora Nwapa's literary worldmaking, aesthetic worlds in conversation with social, natural and spiritual worlds. Her storytelling drew on a long tradition of orature, with its 'central core of fusion and connections that make up the wholeness', an aesthetic reflection of 'a *Weltanschauung* that assumes the normality of the connection between nature, nurture, supernatural, and supernurtural' (Thiong'o 2014, 75, emphasis in original). Yet the wholeness is greater than the parts, because 'Orature is more than the fusion of all art forms. […] It is the flow of a creative spirit' (Ntuli, cited in Thiong'o 2014, 75). To capture this flow of creative spirit, we can appreciate why it takes a globalectic vision to 'release the worldliness in the text', so as to see 'the mutual containment of hereness and thereness in time and space', similarly to the 'Blakean vision of a world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour' (Thiong'o 2014, 60).

Let us now turn to the Goddess of the Crossroads, to appreciate the flow of creative spirit in Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worldmaking. 'The water monarch controls the crossroads and eternal transitions between life and death,' Jell-Bahlsen explains, and refers to Flora Nwapa's novels as illustrations of the powers of the lake Goddess (Jell-Bahlsen 2008, 80). In her elaborations on the crossroads in Igbo cosmology, she describes how individuals cross a river twice, 'before entering and before exciting this world', highlighting how 'the notion of watery transitions at birth and death corresponds to natural science', as exemplified by how the embryo swims in water inside the mother's womb (Jell-Bahlsen 2014, 27–8). In Oguta, the Goddess of the Crossroads and other water deities are associated with nature, reflecting 'the environmental challenges and existential importance of the waters of Ogbuide Lake and her tributaries' (Jell-Bahlsen 2014, 29). As Flora Nwapa wrote, mother is life and water is life. Illustrating the interstitial differentiation and ontological flux of a world in the making, in the Igbo universe a 'human being receives his/her life force, *Chi*, from the supreme God *Chukwu*, the God of Destiny, before birth', along with his/her destiny, but 'an individual's destiny is challenged and *can* be changed, by the supreme water goddess' (Jell-Bahlsen 2014, 27, emphasis in original).

> You know, Ogbuide doesn't choose the person who will serve her. It is destiny. […]
>
> When I got married and was dancing oriri [traditional ritual dance], a man from Ogbaru came to our place and said, 'Call your father.' My father came out and he said to my father, 'This daughter of yours that is dancing oriri is a big native doctor. *She is Mammy Water*.' My father doubted him. After dancing oriri, I started having children. I kept on having children, until 1978 and it happened, I fell ill. I was in the hospital for three months. I was told it was compulsory that I must serve the lake. That was how we journeyed fully into this. So we started doing the rituals and all the rituals. When we finished the rituals, I started serving the lake, but was going to the market. In the early eighties, Ogbuide stopped me from going to the market altogether. It was automatic. There was no contemplation. The day it came to me that I must stop going to the market; I stopped abruptly. We started doing the work on the worship of the lake. Ask Oguta people, they will tell you. No one is as powerful as I am in Oguta. […] There is no day I don't go to Ogbuide. Even on Orie day, I go. The rule is that any day I go there, she accepts me; so I go every day, no matter what. Even when the lake doesn't accept anyone, I fetch water for people who can't go to the lake. (Akuzor Anozia in Nwelue 2016, 1:02–1:06)

Could it be that Ogbuide changed Flora Nwapa's destiny? Could it be that, just like Akuzor Anozia was called to serve Ogbuide as *Ezeugegbe One* (Queen Mirror One), Flora Nwapa was called to serve the divine mother of her Lake People? Not as a native doctor, as N'Dr Stella Akuzor Anozia presents herself on her business card, with the promising slogan 'For all your progressive problems', but as a writer at the crossroads, who served the Goddess of the Crossroads through the power of storytelling and literary worldmaking. Could it be that, through divine intervention in Flora Nwapa's life force, the supreme Water Goddess wanted to send a message to humans around the world that another world is indeed possible?

To release the creative force of aesthetic worldmaking in world literature, let me conclude with the poetic words of the mother of modern African literature, Flora Nwapa, describing the coming to the world of Ona, Ogbuide's chosen priestess (Nwapa 2017, 64–5):

> The journey from the spirit world to our world is long and trying. Sometimes the unborn children get tired on the way and prefer not to go further. Your child should have been the first one. She was not sure whether she wanted to be born to you or not. She kept waiting, going forward and backward. This time she can no longer go back. She has a purpose in this world. She cannot postpone her coming any longer. Make it easy for her.

Invoking Flora Nwapa

Flora Nwapa,
Mother of modern African literature,
Mother of African women's writing and publishing,
Foremother, pathfinder, Chinedu.
Our Mother, we greet you!

Mother of canonical novels *Efuru and The Lake Goddess*.
And *Idu*, *Never Again*, *One Is Enough*, *Women Are Different*.
Mother of short stories *This Is Lagos and Other Stories*, *Wives at War and Other Stories*.
Mother of children's books *Emeka-Driver's Guard*, *Mammywater*,
My Tana Colouring Book, My Animal Colouring Book,
The Miracle Kittens, *Journey to Space, The Adventures of Deke*,
My Tana Alphabet Book, My Animal Number Book.
Mother of poetry and plays *Cassava Song & Rice Song*, *The First Lady: A Play*, *Conversations*
Our Mother, we read you!

Mother of children Ejine Nzeribe, Uzoma Nwakuche, Amede Nzeribe.
Fiancée of Gogo Nzeribe, first wife of Chief Gogo Nwakuche.
First daughter of Christopher I. Nwapa and Lady Martha Onyema Nwapa, *The Coral Queen*.
Eldest sister of four sisters and one brother, Chief Christopher Nwapa.
Granddaughter of Chief Onumonu Uzoaru and Madam Ruth.
Our Mother, we relate you!

Professor Florence Nwanzuruahu Nkeiru Nwapa
Nigeria's First Lady of Letters

First female commissioner of East Central State
First Daughter of Igbo Land Who Travelled on a Good Journey.
Our Mother, we respect you!

Ogbuefi Flora Nwapa
Oguta's famous daughter.
Storyteller of the Lake People.
Messenger of Ogbuide, Uhamiri, Woman of the Lake, Lake Goddess.
Our Mother, we invoke you!

Your spirit lives on
and we feel you.
Your legacy lives on
and we read you.

Stories are life.
Without stories,
who can live?

Flora Nwapa,
Thank you for your stories.
Mbona!

Epilogue: Revisiting Oguta and Thanking Ogbuide

Serenity. I slowly make my way to the lakeshore, the lushness of the palms and trees lining the lake softened by the misty morning air. Silence; the only sound breaking through the still air is the joyful singing of birds greeting a new day. The water is clear, a brownish greenish shade, reflecting the clouds above. Gentle ripples in the water from a fisherman passing in a canoe. Warm humid air embraces my skin, my sandals sink into the wet sand. I dip my hand into the water, pleasantly warm to the touch. Ogbuide, I have come back.

It was dark and raining when Uzoma and I arrived in Oguta the evening before, this time by car from Owerri airport. The Crystal Lake Hotel was a mirage of light amidst the dark forest, its modern polish surreal, air-conditioned comforts powered by a generator.

'Welcome, you are warmly welcome,' Chief Christopher Nwapa had come to the hotel to receive us and rose to his feet with the help of his walking cane to warmly embrace us. The manager treated us to dinner, fish stew with rice. The fresh lake fish was soft, easily picked off the bones, covered in tasty red peppered sauce. After the meal we sat in the pool side bar. Music videos were projected on a large screen, images of Fela Kuti filling the display, afrobeat streaming from loudspeakers. Suddenly the screen projected I LOVE OGUTA.

I was back in Oguta to write this epilogue and during my intense week of cultural immersion I learned that Flora Nwapa's fame extended well beyond her accomplishments as a writer and

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publisher. In Oguta, Flora Nwapa was revered as a hero, a powerful woman who brought development to her hometown and her people.

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It was the final outing ceremony of *Ogbuagu* Onyeka Ahanwa, a newly titled member of Igbu society, on my first day in Oguta, 28 July 2018. I arrived by taxi with Florence Omy Okonya, Uzoma's relative. She was lavishly dressed up for the occasion in a white gown embroidered with shiny studs, a bright orange head wrap framing her powdered face, silver earrings matching her necklace. I had done my best with a long flowery dress and a purple head wrap, tied as a turban, but still fell short of the elegance of Oguta women. Hundreds of people attended the ceremony, and I felt privileged to be part of it, the only white person in the gathering. My video camera gave me a purpose to be present, and people encouraged me to take footage of the event.

I recalled that Flora Nwapa had the honorary title *Ogbuefi*, killer of cow, a prestigious female title. There are currently 68 titled men in Oguta, an aristocracy of wealthy and influential men. In the past, character and deeds were important in assessing deserving candidates, but these days it is mostly about money, Uzoma explained, although he noted that some applicants had been refused. Titled at an early age with the help of his parents, Uzoma was the sixth most senior present, even though other members were more senior in age. Uzoma flew in from Abuja for the lavish initiation ceremony, which coincided with my visit.

By the time we arrived at noon, many had attended the ceremony since the morning, while more people joined throughout the afternoon. Attendants were seated under large white tents, grouped according to village or age grade. I sat with Florence in the tent of her age grade, which was the age grade of the initiate. The group gathered some 40 people, seated on plastic chairs covered with thin fabric. Crates of beer were stacked near a table with bottles of wine and spirits, generously served to everyone.

At this ceremonial gathering, Oguta people showed up in their most beautiful attire. I was impressed by the beautiful garments of

women of all ages: colourful gowns, with intricate embroideries, often with silvery thread or glittering studs, matching wrappers tied around their waists. Their head wraps were equally elaborate, shiny colourful materials with a stiffness that allowed for creative designs, folded in layers and tied into large bows. Their faces were powdered and carefully made up, some with fake lashes accentuating their eyes. The men wore long shirts, some with decorative buttons, and many wore hats. The titled men were donned in long shirts, hats with two feathers and large ceremonial swords marking their status.

The atmosphere was festive, with plenty of drinks and food being served, music streaming through the loudspeakers. Men and women were drinking beer, generously served throughout the day, along with wine and liquors. Plates of jollof rice and chunks of meat were handed out to everyone, followed by snacks of ground nuts. Nigerian and Western hits were played and sometimes people started dancing. To the great delight of people around me, I swayed rhythmically to some of the tunes, while seated on my chair.

From time to time the age grade group broke out in song and dance, the melody rhythmically beaten on traditional instruments, the wooden *uko* and drums. Everyone sang along, some got up and danced, enthusiastically swaying their hips to the rhythmic beat.

I had no idea what was going on at the high table but could hear the greeting *okoma* (mighty sword) from time to time, along with the clang of swords. The titled men were all seated under a tent at the end of the walkway, their tables aligned in a horseshoe shape.

It started raining and the ground got wet and muddy. Florence and I went to a nearby bar until the rain subsided. 'The initiate had asked to "hold the rain"; at least they managed for a while,' Uzoma later told me. We returned just in time for a ceremony upstairs, where the initiate was kept in a room with a few titled elders. Some rituals were performed and concluded with loud cheers by an entourage of women. He was then accompanied back to the high table downstairs, reunited with the other men.

The titled men came out of their tent in a ceremonious fashion, the initiate greeting everyone with his sword. Offerings were

brought forward, a cow and a few goats. A leopard skin was hoisted on a pole above the crowd, many taking photos and videos with their smartphones.

The ceremony proceeded with a walk to the market. Florence and I drove there in our taxi. The marketplace was full of people: it was the *nkwo* market day. Wooden stands with goods on display and people pushing carts through the crowds, shouting '*Uzo!*' (make way).

The attendants for the ceremony filled the open space below a slippery slope, standing around a small, elevated concrete platform where a clay pot was placed, a garland of leaves on the ground beneath it. It was a sacred site, used to cast off evil. After a while the titled men appeared, led by Uzoma. They walked ceremoniously around the platform, holding the garland. When they stopped, people waited in eager anticipation. Uzoma, as the most senior member in the procession, lifted his sword and smashed the clay pot. A woman rushed forward with an enamel bowl, collecting the reddish liquid that poured out, red oil with salt.

The procession continued to the initiate's house, a large modern building with a small courtyard where tents had been set up. The attendants continued the celebration with more food and drinks. I opted out and returned to the hotel for a night of rest, fatigued by a day of ceremonial festivity and participant observation.

ꕥ

'Ezenwanyi!' Uzoma called out as we saw a woman resting by the entrance to her house, having reached the courtyard through a narrow alley. The woman got up and retied her wrapper as she beckoned us to come closer, gesturing us to sit at a wooden bench at the entrance. Her round face broke out in a gentle smile as Uzoma introduced us. She was expecting us. Her daughter Joy appeared, happily greeting us, mentioning she had seen me the day before taking pictures at the Ogbuagu ceremony in the market. Ezenwanyi prepared an enamel plate with kola nuts, garden eggs and alligator pepper corns, placing them in front of Uzoma, adding a 50-naira note when she learned he was titled. Uzoma broke the kola nuts and passed the plate around. I took a

piece of kola and chewed it in small bites, by now quite used to the nutty texture and bitter taste.

Ezenwanyi Madame Akuzor Anozia came across as a friendly old woman, her face resembling my mother's with her warm smile. It was my second day in town and I wanted to greet Madame Akuzor before interviewing her. I had been told she was a high priestess of Ogbuide, commonly addressed as Ezenwanyi. Her business card identified her as N'Dr. Stella Akuzor Anozia (EZEUGEGBE 1). Ezenwanyi and Uzoma spoke in Oguta dialect, establishing relations they had in common. From time to time, the Priestess spoke some words in English. She had not met Flora Nwapa, but she knew of her. She had met Sabine, the anthropologist, on several occasions, as she visited Oguta every few years. She had also met a journalist from Lagos, so she was quite used to being interviewed, she explained to Uzoma. It was Onyeka Nwelue who first put me in touch with the Priestess, months before my arrival in Oguta. I had sent an invitation letter for the Priestess and her daughter Mercy for the screening of Onyeka's film *Island of Happiness* at Stockholm University in September 2018, a film shot in Oguta, featuring the Priestess. Meeting Ezenwanyi in person was a privilege. I passed on a small gift I had brought for her, a kanga from Tanzania. She was delighted.

The Priestess got up and asked me to follow her into her shrine. I entered a large room filled with pots and stacks of herbs and other materials, red and white fabrics hanging on a string against the back wall, covering an entrance to a back room. 'That is Mammywater' – the Priestess pointed to a framed painted image of a woman on the wall – 'and that is Urashi.' She pointed at an image of a man. 'We find such spirits in all waters, rivers, lakes, oceans,' she explained, 'all around the world.' She directed my gaze to a photograph of a beautiful young woman. 'That is me.' I noted a framed certificate on the wall, from the national association of traditional healers. After a while I mustered the courage to greet her 'Ezeugegbe One' (Queen Mirror One), as her daughter Idenu Anozia had taught me in Abuja, and she laughed happily.

'We will have to drop a goat for you bringing your shoes inside' Joy told me from the doorway. Realizing my faux pas, I apologized profusely. 'I was just joking,' she laughed. 'When you come

back we will explain things and we can also visit the shrine on the lake.'

When we returned to the others, the Priestess called for some *kai kai*. A boy filled up a glass bottle, and she placed shot glasses from the shrine near Uzoma to pour. He took one shot and refilled the glass. I took a careful sip; the palm wine liquor was sweet to the taste.

The Priestess and her daughter escorted us to our car parked on the street outside. We agreed that I would come back during the coming week for interviews. Having met the Priestess and seen her shrine, and being welcomed with kola and *kai kai*, I knew I was entering cultural depth, well beyond my comfort zone.

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The next day was sunny, the first rain-free day since I arrived, and the lake looked splendid so Uzoma and I decided to take a boat trip. As we waited for the drivers to settle their loud quarrel on who was going to take us on a boat, I watched another boat being loaded with a motorbike, a goat and several passengers with bags full of goods. Having already agreed with one of the drivers, someone Uzoma had used before, we helped settle the competitive dispute by slowly walking away. It did not take many steps before we were called back. We stepped into the boat, its front pulled on to the concrete landing, and the driver jumped on board, expertly balancing on the rail to the back of the boat. He filled the engine with some fuel he had bought in a large plastic container, pushed the boat into water with a long oar, and directed it onto the lake. We travelled fast, the trees along the lakeshore sweeping by.

As we approached the confluence of Oguta lake and Urashi river, the blue water of the lake met the brown water of the river. The spectacular confluence is a well-known watermark in Oguta, a place where the waters meet but never mix, flowing alongside one another.

We continued down the Urashi river, as spectacular as I remembered it from my first visit. The lushness of the riverside was astounding, a beautiful statement of the power of nature. The earth was a deep reddish brown, the water a murky shade of the same colour. The pristine river bore no signs of human activity, save for

the occasional fishermen in dug-out canoes, slowly and quietly paddling along.

On our way back, I moved to the front of the boat, filming as much as I could with my video camera. I recalled how excited Yaki Bozi had been when we edited footage from the Urashi river for the Efuru@50 documentary. 'I hope to go there one day,' he had said. 'I could make a great film.' In his absence, I did my best to capture the river and the lake, knowing I would watch the clips many times, to remind myself of this magic place that touched my soul.

As we approached the town we turned onto the smaller Obana river on our left, passing large mansions along the shore. Wealthy people had constructed houses testifying to their affluence, several stories high with large verandas facing the lake, imposing pillars and arched windows. As we rode along, more huge houses appeared, including Dr. Alban's white mansion, visible from afar. We could not pass them since a recently built bridge had collapsed, blocking the waterway. The mansions were such a contrast to the many derelict buildings in town, ambitious construction projects that had not been completed, older buildings that had not been maintained or the many simple houses of ordinary people. The gap between elite and ordinary people was pronounced. No wonder that some young men in town turned to crime.

In contrast to its peaceful lake and lush surroundings, the political economy of Oguta was full of paradoxes, an oil-producing town without electricity. The infrastructure had deteriorated over years of neglect: unpaved roads that flooded during rains, rundown schools and public facilities, and, while electric cables could be seen throughout town, there had been no supply of electricity for decades. I was told to avoid certain parts of town, places where young men had turned to crime and robbery, and, for my own security, I was advised not to walk around unaccompanied.

'Whatever remains of infrastructure is thanks to Flora Nwapa during her time as commissioner,' a young female writer in Oguta told me. Years of irresponsible governance and corruption had taken its toll, a topic insightfully addressed by Flora Nwapa's brother Christopher in his book *Political Leadership in Nigeria* (C. Nwapa 2017).

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The Priestess lived in the older part of town, a village not far from the lake, her simple house indicating a lack of material wealth, yet her spiritual power was unmistakable. We visited her in the afternoon after the boat ride. The Priestess greeted me warmly as her daughter. She offered us some *kai kai* and kola. I played with Joy's children for a while, entertaining them with video clips from Tanzania on my phone. 'How many children do you have?' I asked Joy, 'Only five,' she replied. '*Only* five!?' I exclaimed. 'Many women here have a dozen,' she explained laughingly. I was reminded of the centrality of motherhood in Oguta culture.

I went to see the Priestess again the following day, this time with some books: Flora Nwapa's *The Lake Goddess*, Sabine Jell-Bahlsen's *Mammy Water in Igbo Culture*, and my own manuscript *Invoking Flora Nwapa*. I used the books to explain how I came to Nigeria for Efuru@50, how Nwapa's stories about Ogbuide caught my attention, and how easily my work had flowed, as if Flora Nwapa's spirit had called me. The Priestess listened attentively, Joy translating to make sure her mother understood. They both smiled. I explained that I did not really have a list of questions for her but hoped she could tell me what she thought I needed to know.

The Priestess offered me a beer, a Hero. 'You know everything!' I exclaimed at the sight of my favourite brand, 'No, I am not God,' she humbly replied. She then asked if I would like to taste some smoked ram and her daughter brought a plate with a large chunk of blackened meat that she cut up in small pieces, explaining how she prepared it, slowly over a fire, with spices. The meat was chewy and tasty. 'Do you like chicken with pepper sauce?' she asked, and brought a plate of pieces of succulent chicken in a red sauce. I asked if I could use my left hand for the beer, as my right hand was wet with sauce. 'Yes; since you are eating, my mother will allow it,' she responded. At the *Ogbuagu* initiation I had been reprimanded for drinking with my left hand, which only those with titles were allowed to do. The Priestess then told me her story.

'Before I was born, diviners told my father that I came from the water and he should make sacrifices for me once I was born, or I would leave,' the Priestess narrated in heavily accented English. 'But my father forgot to make the sacrifices. When I was

one month old I became sick. He consulted the diviners and they reminded him of the sacrifice required since I came from water. As soon as it was performed I became well again.' Her story reminded me of Ona in *The Lake Goddess*, who was destined to be a priestess before she was born. 'I married young at the age of sixteen,' she proceeded. 'I had seven children. But, when I was pregnant with my eighth child, I got sick with heavy bleedings, and finally a doctor had to take it out by caesarean' – she lifted her shirt to show me the long scar across her belly – 'but the baby did not survive. After that I started collecting these things, slowly.' She swept her hand across the many items in the shrine. 'I used a lot of money to get them. It was in 1983 that I began my service,' she recollected. I looked at Joy and calculated: it was 35 years ago. 'More than fourteen water spirits are here: Ogbuide from the lake, Urashi from the river, the lake co-wife Oshimiri from the river Niger, the High Sea from Port Harcourt, the Bar Beach from the ocean in Lagos.' She listed a few more. 'I can call upon them and they will appear to me.'

'If you have a clean heart, the lake will be good to you.' She held her hand over her chest. Joy clarified that people with bad intentions, greedy and malicious people, were not welcomed by the lake. But people with a clean heart were treated well. 'I can see when a person approaches my house what they are like and I can even turn them away,' the Priestess clarified. 'So many people come to me, asking for different things, children, wealth, what has happened and what will happen to them: all such things I can see.' She pointed to a plate filled with items she used for divination, adding, 'People also make sacrifices to thank the lake: fowl, rams and even cows.'

'Back in those days many people came to me, nowadays they come at night' the Priestess reflected. 'They show off their Christianity, saying they don't believe in oracles, but when it really matters, they know where to turn and they come to me, in the dark of the night.' I was reminded of how Flora Nwapa exposed Christian fanatics in *The Lake Goddess*, using Ona's father, a community-serving *dibia*, to voice a more balanced approach, accepting traditional as well as Christian beliefs. 'They are hypocritical with their Christianity,' Joy inflicted, 'but people

have seen now that the god of the white people has not brought them what they expected.' 'People are now coming back to the old ways,' the Priestess reflected.

Sitting on a low wooden bench in her shrine, the Priestess comfortably leaning against an armchair, I listened intently. Her narrative summarized so many aspects of what I had learned about Ogbuide and Oguta culture through Flora Nwapa's novels, from *Efuru* to *The Lake Goddess*, as well as Sabine Jell-Bahlsen's detailed ethnography. Just like Flora Nwapa, the Priestess used many names for the deity: Ogbuide, Mammywater, water spirit, the lake. And, to the Priestess, Ogbuide was but one of many water spirits, one divinity in a complex spiritual universe of ancestral spirits and other celestial beings interwoven with social life.

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'Flora Nwapa made Oguta more civilized,' the Priestess remarked, smiling at the fond memories of Oguta's famous daughter. 'She was a wealthy woman,' the Priestess added, 'a powerful woman.' Even the markets were closed the day of her burial, the Priestess recollected. Indeed, that is how Flora Nwapa is remembered in Oguta, Uzoma assured me, as someone who brought development. In her comments on my manuscript, Ejine highlighted how 'Oguta people regarded Flora Nwapa as their daughter', adding that: 'A "firing of cannons" preceded Flora Nwapa's burial reserved only for great men that pass on in Oguta, (the kind that Nwashike Ogene in *Efuru* was given), in attestation to her prowess as a daughter of Oguta. Let this not be lost.'

In Oguta, Flora Nwapa is remembered as a *hero*. Talking to various people, I soon realized that Flora Nwapa's fame extended well beyond her accomplishments as a pioneering female writer and publisher. To people in her hometown, she was reverently remembered for her concrete contributions. During her time in government, Flora Nwapa had laid important foundations for the development of her hometown, especially infrastructure. She was credited for the construction of the general hospital, for the building of tarmac roads and even for connecting the town with electricity. In the stories of the Lake People, Flora Nwapa was attributed the characteristics of a mythical hero, a remarkable

woman who lived like a normal Oguta woman yet whose accomplishments were interwoven into the town's historical narrative. 'No one has come close to doing what she did for us,' a man reflected. 'She was a hero!' Joy exclaimed. The day Flora Nwapa was buried, people wept in heartfelt sorrow. Thousands of people filled the streets, following Oguta's famous daughter to her last earthly resting place.

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Led by the Priestess dressed up in red and white for the sacred occasion, our visit to the lake shrine became a joyful family outing on a late afternoon. We were accompanied by her daughter Joy, three grandchildren and a young nephew. Joy had bought some things at the local market: a large white rooster and a brown chicken, soft drinks, a beer and food stuff. The Priestess added some items from her shrine. By the time we left the house, the large basket was packed to the brim. We took motorcycle taxis to the ferry landing. It must have been quite a sight: a white woman and two girls on an *okada*, the smaller one in front of the driver, the other one squeezed between us, accompanied by the ceremoniously dressed Priestess and her daughter. We took a motorized boat across the lake. As we approached a loaded canoe, the driver slowed down so as not to create waves that could capsize it, Joy explained, clarifying lakeside manners.

We made our way slowly, passing the confluence, then turning onto Urashi river, where we entered a small grove. Another boat was already there, fastened to a tree with a rope. We scrambled barefoot out of our boat, helping each other keep balance as we carefully trod the small path leading to the shrine. The shrine was barely visible and if you did not know where it was you would not spot it when passing on the river. The shrine was a simple wooden structure with a tinned roof over a concrete platform with moulded seating areas. Strips of red and white cloth hung from the roof and the area facing the river was covered with heaps of sacrificial items. A dozen young men were in the shrine, a few -of them performing rites.

The Priestess sat down near the offerings, placing me next to her on the concrete seating. She took out various items from the

bag while reciting invocations. She passed on a shot glass of *kai kai* to me, which was then passed on to others, and after a while a bottle of beer, which she instructed me to drink slowly. Our offerings were carefully handled, the rooster pressed against our heads and chest, the bowl of food stuffs circled above our heads. After a while she passed me the white rooster, instructing me to say my prayers while holding it. When I was done she washed its beak and feet in a bowl of water, before sacrificing it.

When the Priestess had completed the rituals, she encouraged me to take pictures and video footage. As soon as I pulled out my video camera, everyone started dancing and singing. The Priestess played a traditional flute, happily swaying to the music. I was not sure if it was for my camera's benefit, but everyone had a great time, smiling and laughing while dancing. After a while some of the young men came close to me, 'snapping' me in their selfies.

We proceeded from the Urashi shrine to the Ogbuide shrine, which was tucked away among trees by the lakeside, barely visible from the water. Unlike the Urashi shrine, there were no other people at the Ogbuide shrine, except a boy who lived nearby. The Priestess explained to me that it was Urashi day, thus there were many people at that shrine; the following day would be Ogbuide day. The Ogbuide shrine was similar in structure, a tinned roof on wooden poles over a concrete platform, strips of red and white cloth hanging from the roof, as well as some tied ropes hanging from one side. The Priestess performed similar rituals for Ogbuide and we sacrificed the chicken.

When we returned to her house, the Priestess invited me into her shrine. She gave me some sacred items to take with me, pieces of chalk, one for Urashi and one for Ogbuide.

The whole experience was quite overwhelming, yet my heart was at peace. It was the first time in my life that I participated in such kind of spiritual ritual, yet it felt quite natural, as if destined to happen. The first day I met her, the Priestess had said we could go to the lake shrine. After a few days in her company I felt it was right to not only visit the shrine but also give my thanks. So I gave my thanks to Ogbuide, Flora Nwapa and my Priestess Mother, along with all others who have helped me in so many ways on this extraordinary journey. Mbona!

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Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) was the first internationally published novel in English by a female African writer. Although Flora Nwapa has been recognized as the Mother of modern African literature, she is not sufficiently acknowledged in world literary canons or world literature studies, which is something this monograph aspires to redress from an anthropological perspective with the help of earlier studies, especially by Nigerian scholarship. Drawing on the Efuru@50 celebration in Nigeria in 2016, this book explores the revival of Flora Nwapa's fame as the pioneer of African women's literature.

By exploring experimental ethnographic writing, the author combines the genres of creative non-fiction, descriptive ethnography and scholarly analysis in an effort to make the text more accessible to academic as well as non-academic readers. Inspired by the social change perspective of African womanism and critical decolonial theory, the book makes a contribution to current efforts to explore a more socially just and environmentally sustainable world of many worlds.

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