

## Matrix

Journal for Matricultural Studies  
Revue d'études matriculturelles



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

## L'eau, agent de purification et substance vitale : les relations des femmes avec l'eau dans les provinces du sud du Nigéria

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Volume 4, Number 1, 2025

Women and Water: The Flow of Matriculture  
Les femmes et l'eau : le flux des systèmes matriculturels

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1117487ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60676/qpjdv25>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

International Network for Training, Education, and Research on Culture

ISSN

2563-3392 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ekpenyong Mfon, E. (2025). Water, an Agent of Purification and Life Sustenance: The Relationships of Women with Water in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria. *Matrix*, 4(1), 70–96. <https://doi.org/10.60676/qpjdv25>

### Article abstract

In traditional Nigerian societies, women and girls predominantly bear the responsibility of fetching water, reflecting their nurturing roles within families and communities. Water is essential for domestic tasks like cooking, laundry, and child bathing, positioning women as the primary gatherers. Many Nigerian cultures link water with healing, purification, fertility, and life, often involving women in rituals that promote well-being and restore balance. This paper explores multi-ethnic Nigerian beliefs about women and water, with a special focus on the Igbo people. Over six months, interviews with women from various ages and social statuses provided diverse perspectives on these cultural practices. Key findings reveal the significant roles women play in festivals such as the Osun Festival in Osogbo, the Igwe Festival in Benin City, and the Yemoja Festival in Ibadan, where rituals are centered around rivers and women are pivotal participants. Additionally, in many Nigerian cultures, it is frowned upon for men to perform domestic chores or fetch water, as these tasks are traditionally assigned to women. The study underscores the central role of women in water-related activities and rituals, emphasizing the need for policies that address the unique challenges women face in accessing water and sanitation.

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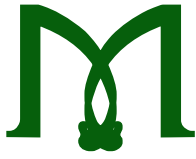
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## **Water, an Agent of Purification and Life Sustenance: The Relationships of Women with Water in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria**

**ETIM EKPENYONG MFON**

### **Abstract**

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



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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

## Résumé

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

## Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

### *Conceptual Framework*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

relations with their natural environment (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

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

### *Primary and Secondary Languages*

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

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

### *Population*

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



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

### *Kinship System and Social Organization*

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

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

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

### *Time Frame of the Research*

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

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

### *Selection Criteria and Demographic Details of Interviewees*

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

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

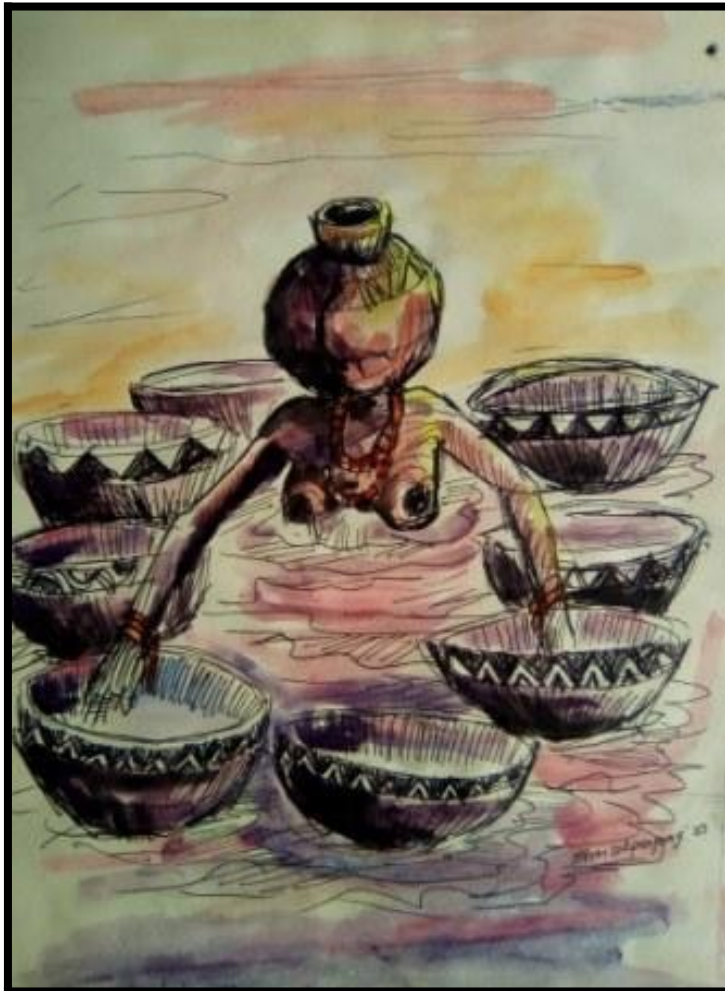
**Title:** *Laundry at the Stream*  
**Artist:** Etim Ekpenyong  
**Medium:** Etimpaste and pen on paper  
**Year:** 2023



### **Daily Interactions with Water**

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

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



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

**Title:** *Multi-task*

**Artist:** Etim Ekpenyong.

**Medium:** Etimpaste and pen on paper

**Year:** 2023

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

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

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

**Title:** *Homemaker*

**Artist:** Etim Ekpenyong

**Medium:** Etimpaste and charcoal on canvas

**Year:** 2023



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



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

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

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

**Title:** *Water Gatherers*

**Artist:** Etim Ekpenyong

**Medium:** Etimpaste and pen on paper

**Year:** 2023



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

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



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

**Title:** *Ada Igbo fetching water*

**Photographer:** Adaeze Nwa'Nsukka

**Source:**

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ada\\_igbo\\_fetching\\_water.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ada_igbo_fetching_water.jpg)

**Year:** 2022

### *Challenges of Accessing Potable Water*

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

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



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

**Title:** *Mother Care*

**Artist:** Etim Ekpenyong

**Medium:** Etipaste and pen on paper

**Year:** 2023

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





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

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

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

### **Symbolic and Spiritual Significance of Water**

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



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

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

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

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

**Title:** *Oral Narrative*

**Artist:** Etim Ekpenyong

**Medium:** Etimpaste and charcoal on canvas

**Year:** 2023



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



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

**Title:** *A Sacred Affair*

**Artist:** Etim Ekpenyong

**Medium:** Etimpaste and pen on paper

**Year:** 2023

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

## Four Case Studies

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

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



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

**Title:** *Arugbá*

**Artist:** Etim Ekpenyong.

**Medium:** Etimpaste and pen on paper

**Year:** 2023

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

### (3) *Igue Festival, Benin City*

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

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

### (4) *Uzoro festival of Akoko-Edo*

**Plate 13:** Photograph of the Uzoro festival

**Source:**

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

**Retrieved:** 6 March 2025



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

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

## Discussion

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

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

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

#### *Interpretation of Results in the Context of Existing Literature*

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

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

#### *Theoretical and Practical Implications*

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

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

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

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

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

### **Conclusion**

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



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



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

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

### About the Author / Artist

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

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