

**Streams as Protected Entities of Indigenous People of South-eastern  
Nigeria: A Matter of Water Security or Cultural Solidarity?**

**By**

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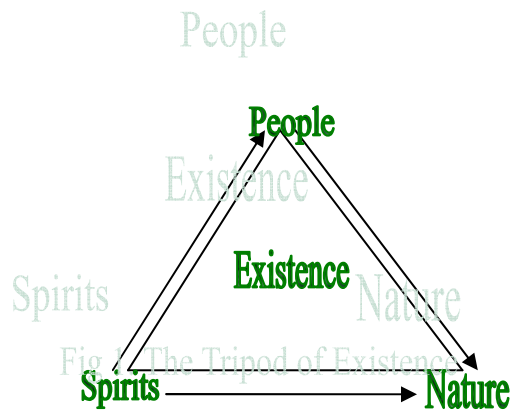
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**Introduction**

Indigenous people the world over represent unique sub-sets of the main population. Variances of names are often utilized to locate such a collective species of people around geographical areas e.g., ‘natives’, ‘locals’, ‘indigenes’, among others. In some sense, these describe ‘a people deeply attached to culture and natural environment’. Apart from helping sustain their harmonious existence with nature, such attachments are critically meaningful and distinctive to their collective identity. Dudley et.al (2005) wrote that indigenous people believe that spirits permeate and animate matter, meaning that natural phenomena encompass spirits. In turn spirits can affect nature, sometimes in response to human actions: for instance moral transgressions can trigger natural calamities.

Human-environment relationship as a common characteristics of indigenous people is unique and thoroughly internalized, reinforced by religion and customary values. Most religious faith conceptualize existence as anchored in the tripod of spirits, people and nature (Fig 1)



**Fig 1. The Tripod of Existence**

In such contexts, spirits are existentially part of humans, as it is also embodied in nature. The ancestors, the gods and goddesses are mediatory spiritual agencies prompting cautious and responsible human environment relationship. Cultural factors and development trajectories explain the degree of conservatism or dynamic shape to which these relationships are sustained over some periods of time. The urban and rural areas are two extreme arenas (in developing country contexts) for bearing out this hypothesis. While the former, characterised by modernised activities and institutions as well as conflation of disparate migrants, encourages development that tends to set man apart from nature, the latter (mostly occupied by those deeply involved in traditional but less exposed to modern lifestyles) see themselves as part of the natural environment (Black, 1970).

In developing countries in general and African countries in particular, human-environment relationships are measured through the ways natural resources are utilized as well as the general environmental decisions governing such utilization. Such relationships have, doubtless, been able to mediate a dynamic and responsible mutual coexistence between man and nature over a

long period of history. The extent to which this assumption holds true is seen in Bening's (2009) write-up which quoted the FAO as suggesting that developing countries should return to the traditional methods of farming in order to ensure food security. This call might have been necessitated by an admission of the high level of environmental accountability which is often seen as the norm of traditional resource users and managers (Akpabio, 2011). Moreso, the failure of conditioning a dynamic adaptation of traditional societies to modern ways of sustainable utilization of natural resources (due largely to ignorance and a lack of thorough and sustained adaptive education) implies serious coping problem. Given the dilemma of a discarded traditional methods and a prospect of inability to cope with the modern trend of sustainable resource utilization, the stage is then set for bungling-an euphemism for poor resource utilization because of poor education and training. Beyond these, traditional resource users are often most sensitive to outside encroachments mostly for fear of alienation or marginalization by the application of modern methods. In Africa, reactionary behaviours to such perceived encroachments often manifest in tensions and conflicts of various shapes.

Indeed, it could be seen from the implication of several studies (Matowanyika, 1991; Gadgil et.al, 1993 and Millar, 2004) that traditional attachment and moral responsibility to natural resources spontaneously stem from the numerous but indispensable tangible and intangible gains which are critical to the existence and dynamic functioning of their societies. Studies rarely ponder at the depth of such gains as well as the core roles and values of specific natural resources that makes it an emotional issue for indigenous

societies especially in Africa. One specific aspect of natural resource that could better explain human-environment relationship in Africa is in the continued existence of ‘sacred natural sites<sup>1</sup>’ and ‘protected areas<sup>2</sup>’. While protected areas are declared and decreed by responsible authorities, sacred natural sites are mostly linked to a deity and are of particular importance to communities, groups or even individuals (Dudley et.al, 2005). Aspects of sacred natural sites known across cultures and geographies are water bodies. Water bodies are enduring features of nature and include rivers, ponds or lakes, streams and springs. They attend sacred status because of their healing powers, ritualistic values, species habitats, regenerative importance, among other spiritual, material and religious significance.

In this paper, specific emphasis is focused on the stream ecosystem in south-eastern Nigeria. Some streams have assumed the role of being ‘sacred sites’ of cultural importance over the years. However, little thought has been given to its potentialities in enhancing the effectiveness of local governance of the state. This paper specifically explores some of the attributes and meanings of the stream ecosystem in its various cultural dimension in south eastern Nigeria.

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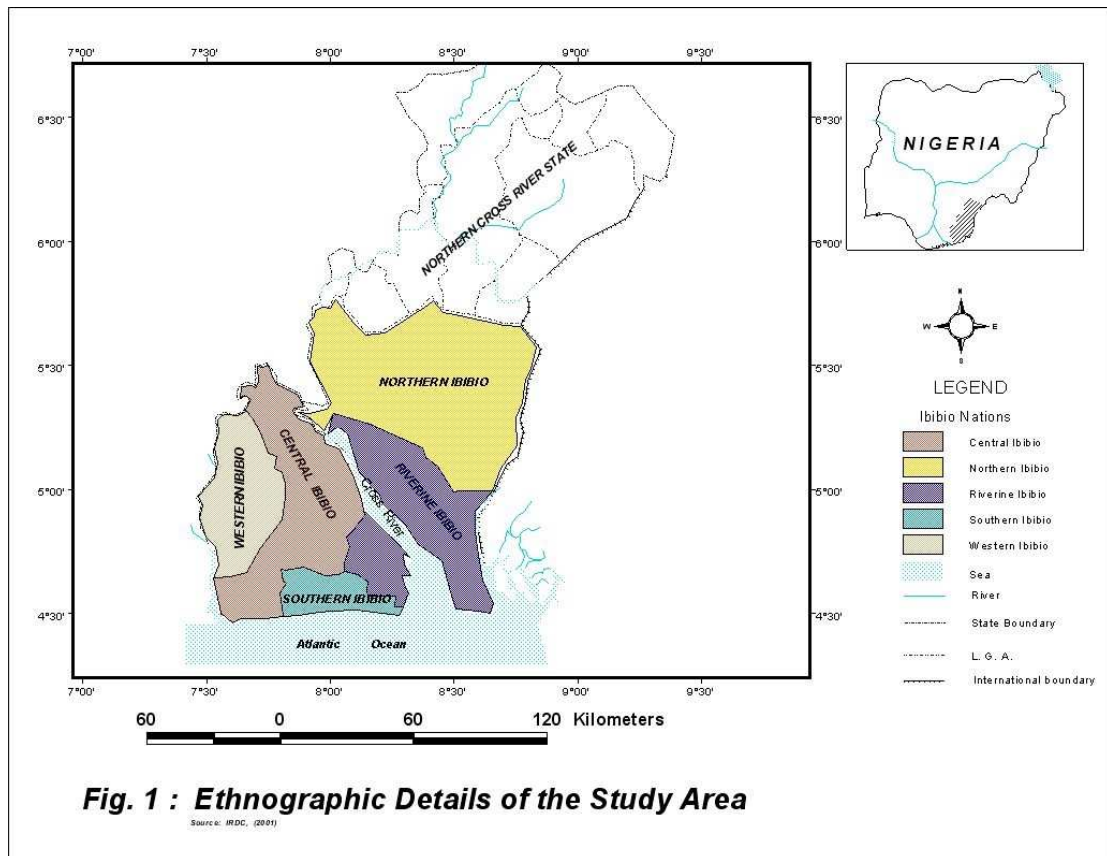
<sup>1</sup> Sacred Natural sites are defined as specific places recognized by traditional and indigenous people as having spiritual and religious significance or as sites established by institutionalized religions or faiths as places of worship and remembrance (Soutter et.al (2001)

<sup>2</sup> The IUCN defines protected areas as an area of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means. In other words, they are set up primarily for the protection of biodiversity but may also have a range of other important social, cultural and economic values. Protected areas exist under literally dozens of different names, with common ones including national parks, nature reserves and wilderness areas. They also exhibit a wide variety of different management regimes, ranging from strictly ‘no-go’ areas that are effectively kept free of any human presence to large landscapes or seascapes where biodiversity protection takes place alongside traditional management and frequently also permanent human communities.

This paper is a product of several interviews, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, physical observation, personal experiences and narratives of individuals and groups. The work is ongoing project on ‘exploring the tension between indigenous beliefs and development initiatives about water in a part of Nigeria’. The project also uses some local proverbs about water in understanding the depth of local beliefs in it. Before highlighting the traditional importance of the stream ecosystem in south-south Nigeria, the paper first discusses the general background ethnography with emphasis on meanings of water and how it is managed. The third section looks at the various values, roles and importance attached to water bodies in south-south Nigeria. The fourth section discusses the general challenges and opportunities in relations to indigenous and State aspects of natural resources management with specific reference to the water bodies. This is followed by concluding remarks.

### **South-eastern Nigeria: its Generalized Ethnography**

South-eastern Nigeria is used here to denote the present Akwa Ibom and Cross River states (Fig 2). This particular paper concentrates in Akwa Ibom state.



Akwa Ibom state has three major ethnic groups (namely, Ibibio, Annang and Oron) with a total population of 3,920,208 spread across a landmass of 8,412km<sup>2</sup> (NPC, 2007) with 87.89% forming the rural population while 12.11% forms the urbanising population. Agriculture and related works occupy 40.9% of the population with the rest of the economically active employed population constituting 48.5% (Ekong, 2003). Ninety percent of Akwa Ibom indigenes are Christians. Traditional Rulers, by the oath of their office, maintain traditional (pagan) form of worship, through libation and regular communication with ancestors.

The people of Akwa Ibom speak diverse languages reflecting the socio-cultural and ethnic background of the State. The common language understandable to all the ethnic groupings is the Ibibio dialect. There are 31

local government areas in the state, each administered by a group of representatives at their respective council headquarters. Uyo is the headquarters of the state and forms the centre, which attracts the rural people from different parts of the state for greener pastures.

Ekong (2003) recognized seven types of land holdings, some of which have relationship and implication for water utilization and management. This includes the community or communal land (*Ikot Idung*); lineage land (*Ikot Ekpuk or Ikot Ufok*); individual holdings (*Okpokpo Ikot or Ndedep Ikot*); borrowed land (*Nno Nkama or Nto Nwo Ikot*); pledged land (*Ubiong Ikot*); secret society land (*Owok Ekpe or Owok Nka*); sacred groves (*piece of land dedicated either to deities or for the disposal of those who did not die in the proper manner*). In relation to water use and management, individual holdings, imply right of ownership of all available groundwater within the land area according to the Land use Act of 1978, while surface water, notwithstanding the types of land holding system, belongs to the community. Water bodies found in sacred groves or secret society lands carry the same treatment as the land itself namely restricted entry, persistent sacrifices, among others. In urban areas most of these types of land holdings have given way to individual ownership for development and settlement expansion purposes as distinct from the traditional forms of ownership still very much common in rural areas.

### **General Understanding and Management of Water Resource**

The meanings, images and understanding of water vary depending on individual or group background (see Akpabio, 2006, 2008, 2009 and 2011 for detail analyses). However, there were common recurrences and shared meanings across all individuals and groups irrespective of faith and religious

affiliation. Two key meanings were very common, namely “free gift from nature” and “embodiment of spirits.” Other sub-meanings and images equated water with “life,” “spirits,” “destruction” and “death.” Such meanings and images can better be understood in the context of water related proverbs (Table 1)

**Table 1. Water Related Proverbs/Beliefs, Meanings and Management Implications in Akwa Ibom State.**

<b>Proverbs/Beliefs</b>	<b>Direct Meanings</b>	<b>Senses/Management Implication</b>
Mmoon-mmoon eyet idioknkpø, idiok-nkpø iyetke mmoon	It is only water that can wash away dirt (i.e., cleans or purify), dirt cannot clean or purify water	This is a declaration that licence one to make use of water within reach, no matter how the quality is. It implies water cannot harm
Mmoon edi ake Abasi	Water is a gift from God	You cannot commodify it. It cannot harm. It cannot be dry. It is a perfect gift. If it does not rain today, it will rain tomorrow. Water is free for all
Otoono uduan iso mmoon, afo mmunwono, eyen usø ayaanwoŋ/ Qøk ikim inyan iduokke duøk, edem ete mminwoŋo, edem eka aya onwoŋ	You who defecates at the mouth of the spring, if you don't drink from it, your relative will drink from it.	A warning against all forms of pollution or dumping of wastes on water bodies.
Mmoon edi idung ndem ye ukpong owo/ ndem mmoon	Water is the dwelling place for the spirits and souls of humans	This is a warning against using poisonous substances, e.g., chemicals for fishing. No cultivation is allowed around watershed or banks of streams/rivers. The idea is that if the spirits are exposed, they will be angry and the stream will be silted off. Chemical fishing is an abomination.
Ebem iso idim anye okoi eti mmoon	The first person to go to stream (in the morning) will definitely obtain clean water	This is applicable in the dry season in some communities when there is immense pressure on stream sources.
Mmoon enem ke køp/ Mmoon uyet- ubøk adaadat owo	Water is sweet (harmless) when only it is inside a cup/ Even a little quantity of water as small as that for a washing of hands can drown	Treating water with deep respect and fear. Emphasizing extra care about rivers and other water bodies

Source: Fieldwork, 2007

There is a common proverb among the people in the local Ibibio dialect as follows: *Mmoon enem ke køp/ Mmoon uyet-ubøk adaadat owo*. The literal interpretation of this is “water is sweet (harmless) when only it is inside a cup/ even a little quantity of water as small as that for a washing of hands



can drown.” This proverb implies that water gives life and it is good to use it when in a cup, but beyond that water can destroy or harm. Water is commonly believed to hold the key to human survival, and to limit the use of water is to threaten the livelihoods of the people. Traditionally “water is looked upon as nature’s endowment for the survival of man.” This sense of water implies free use and, just like air, water is believed to be an inexhaustible resource. Images of water among the people also connote some fears. The fear of being drowned, for instance, has spiritual connection, which is very much linked to the belief that water is the habitat for various forms of spirits. These spirits may include *Ndem* (water spirits, *mami wata*) and *Ukpong Owo* (souls of humans), among others. The belief in water spirits is more emphasized in traditional circles and among the older generations. Traditional rulers often maintain direct communication with water spirits through some ritual channels. This is often seen as a way of keeping the spirits active and lively to be able to sustain the various sources of water which in turn will sustain us.” Streams in secret society lands (*Owok Ekpe* or *Owok Nka*) and sacred groves are of very high spiritual and religious importance such that restricted entry is openly enforced by certain traditional codes of access to maintain their sanctity. Such water sources attract various forms of obeisance and rituals, while entry is restricted in some days to enable the fulfilment of some ritual formalities.

While the life-giving image is bound up in drinking water, its flip side is defined by the inherent stream/river characteristics which can drown, destroy and kill if not properly and carefully utilized or managed. Explanation for these often draws from the spiritual perspectives—a river flood is often

attributed to the angry of the gods and spirits for having been offended. Given these ‘ambivalent’ nature, water resource, therefore, has become one of the key natural phenomenon that tend to extract deep reverence and respect among members of a given community, giving rise to some form of accountable and responsible attitudes for in its management.

Water is also believed to be a free gift from God. This belief is loaded with many meanings. It assumes perfection having come from God. For instance there is a general local proverb which says *Mmoonη-mmooη eyet idioknkpø, idiok-nkpø iyette mmooη* (It is only water that can wash away dirt, dirt cannot clean or purify water) (Table 1). The inherent belief is that anything associated with God is presumed perfect. The ‘perfect ness’ notion of water resource promotes responsible management decision among its users. However, the bad side about this notion of ‘perfect ness’ is that it tends to overlook water quality problems. Even when the quality of a water source is physically very poor, it still cannot be questioned for drinking and other domestic purposes. Consequently, people tend to obtain their daily water from whatever source irrespective of quality. There is a particular stream at Ikono (Idim mbat) that is freely utilized without question or complaints, no matter how dirty. It was gathered that any complaint about its poor quality condition automatically attracts natural punishment from the gods of the stream (the punishment could be sudden disappearance of the complainant or any other form of physical disabilities).

### ***Management Practices***

How water is perceived influences the way it is managed. Three groups of agents or actors manage water in the study areas: a) domestic managers, the

daily practical users of water, primarily women and children; b) farmers - seasonal water users who are both women and men; and c) village council members or traditional rulers, who make up daily water governance groups and engage in a range of spiritual and practical measures to protect and manage available water sources. Of these, the role of the traditional rulers becomes of greatest importance mostly in the spiritual dimension. Such role revolves around regular and direct spiritual, ritual, regulation and enforcement duties with respect to use and protection of available water sources. Such roles have been known to contribute, in no small measures, in the promotion of social cohesion, preservation of the resource and cultural integrity of traditional communities. For most communities, these standards remain a non-negotiable imperative as a way of ensuring the survival of their resources. Such norms make it traditionally abominable, for instance, to pollute water sources with chemicals, and fishes caught through chemical means are traditionally seen as unwholesome and unfit for consumption. The belief that some human souls are embodied in some aquatic animals engender the notion that chemical substances often become inimical to those lives and thus the human souls believed to be embodied in them.

The protection of stream sources also involves farming restriction around riparian areas, regulations against waste dumps, and enforcement of good practices of cooperative water use and management. Given that water sources are shared among riparian communities, traditional norms that encourage cooperative and responsible management practices tend to cut across communities. Irresponsible use of streams are discouraged, e.g., the traditional abhorrence and criminalization of waste dumps or the use of any

form of chemicals on stream sources for any purpose. What then are the roles of water bodies that attract so much local valuations and attachment? The next section addresses this issue.

### **Water Bodies, Local Values and Practices**

Water bodies in Akwa Ibom state Nigeria have given rise to many forms of practices that tend to give meaning to local values, relationship and consequently impact on the functioning of local institutions. These have been observed in the following areas namely, local social and spiritual identity; strengthening traditional institutions, regulation of human relationship with the natural environment; as well as aiding communal livelihood pursuits, among several other issues. These are discussed as below.

#### **Water bodies and social/spiritual identity**

Water is essential in the construction of social identity given the deep attachments from individuals and groups. Most places are defined based on their spatial relationship to particular water places, or to a certain category of water depending on its importance to the community. Globally, streams, rivers and the seas provide identity and natural boundary lines for countries, communities and governments. They are clearly delineated and widely recognized. They separate nationalities, ethnicities and cultures. In actuality, streams have served to define the governance space both in the physical (conspicuous boundary points) and in the abstract (most spiritual activities within a delineated community are defined by available water bodies). Physically, most water bodies have been used to name countries, states and communities. Cambridge (UK) has a link with river Cam; Nigeria and Niger republic have links with the river Niger; Chad republic has a link with lake

Chad; Akwa Ibom state (south-south Nigeria) has a link with Kwa Ibo river; Cross River state (south-south Nigeria) has a link with the Cross river; Imo state (south-east Nigeria) has a link with Imo river; Anambra state in eastern Nigeria (Anambra river); Yobe state in northern Nigeria (river Yobe). There are several other river/stream-linked names around the globe.

For most traditional societies in south-south Nigeria, the name and boundary significance of streams are loaded with spiritual meanings, and often become the spiritual symbol, giving existential meanings, identity and direction to the people. Among many indigenous people in Akwa Ibom state, there still prevails the spirit of the invisible ‘Abasi Ibom’ – a deity of identity. ‘Supreme God’ is even interpreted as Akwa Abasi Ibom in Ibibio language. In Ikono local government area, ‘Idim Ibom’ (a river situated in between Nkwot Nung Imo and Nkwot Ikot Akpa Isiak) is a local continuation of the identity and solidarity clearly facilitated by a water body. ‘Ika Itiaba,’ a river in the northeast of Akwa Ibom state remains a spiritual medium and force that services some core elements of the traditional institutions such as ‘mbiam’. Traditionally, streams and rivers have evolved as natural platform that defines and facilitate the coordination of the governance activities of a given community. In most traditional activities, collective actions, administrative functions of a community have direct or indirect link with local streams and rivers. Given these, it naturally follows that the affected communities derive their natural incentives for protecting and preserving available water bodies for the numerous roles and constructs attributed to such bodies of water.

## A medium for propagating the traditional institutions of governance

Water bodies in south-eastern Nigeria are often conceptualized as an agency for various gods, goddesses and the spirits. ‘Ndem’ or ‘mami wata’ (water goddesses); Ukpong owo (souls of humans) are the various forms of inexplicable spiritual agencies often deified. Such beliefs hold every traditional authority responsible and accountable in maintaining the sacrosance and powers of such spiritual agencies on water. As the village head is traditionally the commander-in-chief of all recognized aspects of material and spiritual powers on water and on land, it behoves every successor to a traditional authority stool to be well grounded and knowledgeable in all communications and administrative strategies embodied in the traditional governance system. Modes of sacrifices, incantations as well as deep knowledge of administrative issues and calendars are basic ingredients and pre-requisite for a successful traditional leadership. The notion of water being an agency for the spirits and goddesses is reflected in the attitudes and images of ‘fear’, uncritical attitude to its quality and its perception as an avenger of wrongdoings. Certain proverbs reinforce some elements of these (Table 2).

**Table 2: Water Related Proverbs/Beliefs, Meanings and Management Implications in Akwa Ibom State.**

Proverbs/Beliefs	Direct Meanings	Senses/Management Implication
Mmoon-mmoon eyet idioknkpø, idiok-nkpø iyette mmoon	It is only water that can wash away dirt (i.e., cleans or purify), dirt cannot clean or purify water	This is a declaration that licence one to make use of water within reach, no matter how the quality is. It implies water cannot harm
Mmoon edi idung ndem ye ukpong owo/ ndem mmoon	Water is the dwelling place for the spirits and souls of humans	This is a warning against using poisonous substances, e.g., chemicals for fishing. No cultivation is allowed around watershed or banks of streams/rivers. The idea is that if the spirits are exposed, they will be angry and the stream will be silted off. Chemical fishing is an abomination.
Mmoon enem ke køp/ Mmoon uyet-	Water is sweet (harmless) when only it is inside a cup/	Treating water with deep respect and fear. Emphasizing extra care about

ubøk adaadat owo	Even a little quantity of water as small as that for a washing of hands can drown	rivers and other water bodies
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Source: Fieldwork, 2007

The belief in water spirits reflects in the various mythical association and interpretation to certain water related problems. River floods are often linked to the restiveness and anger of the spirit agency. In my childhood, several myths were often attributed to the surges and overflow of such rivers as ‘Ika Itiaba’ and Ukwok rivers. There were times that a stream in my village, ‘obombom’ was rumoured to be undergoing transformation into a big river. In such instance, the rise in the water level indicated that it was preparing to consume human beings in the process. Many users were scared from visiting it. Streams in secret society lands (Owok Ekpe or Owok Nka) and sacred groves are of very high spiritual and religious importance such that in some communities, people rarely use for drinking and other domestic purposes except for ritualistic purposes. Although outright restriction of entries is not common this days, in most cases a day or two is reserved against utilization, the idea being to allow some measure of privacy to the goddesses and the spirits as well as give room for regular sacrifices and rituals as forms of obeisance to the spirit kingdom. One traditional ruler affirmed this when he stated thus: ‘where the sources of water are found in these lands [i.e, secret society land and sacred groves], it is customary to set aside some portions in some days for the purposes of sacrifice and worship.’ Women seem to be at the most receiving ends of these practices namely, one: they are traditionally not allowed access while the period lasts; two, on free days, women in their menstrual cycle are traditionally barred from using such a water body.

## **A traditional medium for avenging wrongdoings**

The notion of imputing some spiritual and religious significance on streams and rivers facilitates their utilization for arbitration and avengement for wrongdoings. Such roles have been utilized to strengthen the moral foundation of a community. Swearing, open baths and some invocations often feature any occasion of traditional arbitration. The waters of such streams oftentimes constitute elements of traditional spiritual concoctions such as ‘mbiam<sup>3</sup>’. Most traditional communities use these medium to settle disputes, curb social crimes and other vices as well as healing strange sicknesses among community members. ‘Etok idim’ in Ibesikpo Asutan (as captured in a song by a local Musician-Udo-Abiana) is a familiar and clearly documented example which arbitrated in a family where two housewives were accusing each other of stealing a goat meat in the house. In Ikono, the services of a certain stream (Idim mbat) are always engaged for vengeance against offenders in the community. People swear to ‘idim mbat’ as a basis for establishing truth and credibility of information. The fact that the outcomes of any arbitration are not normally contested perhaps gives credence to the potency and credibility of such agencies. Sustaining the spiritual strength of such streams imply constant sacrifices and sacred observances. In some instances, rites involve the use of soft drinks, biscuits, and groundnuts thrown inside a stream or a river. Across the ethnic groups, streams of special religious and spiritual importance enjoy some free days of non-visitation (e.g., Idim Urua Ituen in Oruk Anam, Idim mbat in Ikono). Such free days, ‘ebet idm’ is one of the ways of according privacy to the gods and goddesses of such streams. Stories of snakes of

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<sup>3</sup> Mbiam is an avenger of broken vows sworn upon his name, or of wrong done to any. A person who swears falsely by mbiam or steals where mbiam had been invoked is bound to be sick and die.



different species and ‘mami water’ in human manifestation are familiar testimonies of individuals who accidentally violate or disobey such special traditional privacy days for the water spirits. Violation normally attracts negative sanctions ranging from minor ‘on the spot consequences’, strange encounters to outright disappearance of the erring individual.

### **A medium for solving human problems**

Streams have been traditionally instrumental as important medium for solving most human and societal problems in the study area. Spiritually ‘possessed’ individuals are claimed to be ‘water linked’. ‘Mami water’, ‘mermaid spirits’ are often believed to operate in human beings, controlling behaviours and influencing wealth. Such individuals are hardly allowed visits to streams or rivers for fear of disappearance. Traditionally streams serve as the only medium of communication through sacrifices to regulate the behaviours of the ‘mami water’ victims. Females and males of fairer complexions are believed to be spiritually ‘possessed’ and susceptible, with preponderance in the frequency of the female victims. The ‘complexion effect’ derives from the notion and the images of ‘mami water’ as a ‘fair complexioned being’ assuming a feminine gender. Most families restrict their susceptible female daughters from visiting big streams and rivers. In one of my interactions with a grown up lady (in her late 20s), this was confirmed as thus, ‘no! no!.....my parents never allow me to visit a river.....they often warn anybody from carrying me to the stream.....but if I find myself closer to a stream or water body, I will feel more psychologically good, more at home and more composed in the mind.....they believe is an inherited possession in the family.....some of the sacrifices they made are what I don’t

like....’ Despite the reality of modernity, most people in the rural areas still find themselves inevitably attached to these beliefs. The Christian religion has, to some extent, relegated the embrace of these beliefs and practices to the domain of secrecy. People hardly come out in the open to embrace the belief; most of the sacrifices are practiced mostly at night and in the secrets if only to avert sanctions from the church authorities. Streams that serve such medium of spiritual significance are often protected from wrong use, by public or private development initiatives, by the traditional authorities. Given that such streams are still very many is a testimony to the consensus on their spiritual importance. Across the State, such streams are many and few of them include: *Idim Mbat, Idim Ibom (Ikono), Idim Urua Ituen (Oruk Anam) Ika Itiaba*, among several others.

#### **The life-wire of socio-economic activities of a community**

Streams serve as important source of social and economic activities for the livelihoods of the greatest number of people in south eastern Nigeria. Most activities involving laundry, baths, fishing, relaxation for local communities are carried out in-stream. After a day’s task, people visit the stream to have their relaxation through bath and for laundry activities. These activities hardly give the needed satisfaction if performed in the house. More so, it brings many people together and facilitates social interaction, sharing of ideas, discussion of important village issues and gossiping among community members. For this, streams and rivers are always given high regard and jealously guarded. For being part of the socio-economic lives of the people, water sources sometimes become object of worship giving rise to many forms of sacrifices. Such spiritual dimension of water resources creates the incentive and

motivation for protection and preservation of the resources and its ecosystem among the people.

### **Challenges and opportunities**

Generally, it was discovered that the spiritual significance of water is cross-religious and cross-ethnic given the behaviours exhibited by the Christian and traditional religious system in relations to water. Though the perception and behaviours of the two religious groups may differ about water, their ideas and values still see water in the spiritual spectacle (compare Isaiah 35 with various oral accounts and traditional proverbs about water). Furthermore, understanding the spiritual framings around water could be glimpsed through the various acts of beliefs and commonality of practices centred on ‘mami wata’ or other goddesses; sacrifices, sacred sites, forbidden days, baptismal rituals, holy water etc. These give indication of the prevalence of water worship. Although there have been significant changes as a result of the impact of modernization, water worship still find accommodation in the minds of individuals and groups across the area. The urban environment seems no exception as one respondent had this to say in respect of the Uyo village stream (situated in Uyo urban-the administrative capital of Akwa Ibom state): ‘.....about late last year (2010) in the early hours of the night, a woman and a man drove in a car and parked close by.....then the woman came out barefooted into the stream and started throwing items into it.....they did not see us.....and suddenly, we went out and warned them against poisoning the stream.....As they drove-off, we took the number plates of their vehicle.....’. The respondent, however, saw that incident as an act of stream poisoning. In his belief: ‘...we were afraid that a once friendly stream in the area may turn

out to be unfriendly.....taking human lives and drowning people...’. Within urban areas, these sayings remarkably illustrate the ambivalent and conflicting attitudes about water bodies with implication that water worships and ritual activities around it are conducted in secrecy most especially in the silence of the night.

Issues bordering on customary or indigenous management of water are hardly and explicitly recognized in the Nigerian water statutes (Akpabio, 2007). Where limited recognition is given, statutory laws always take precedence in case of conflicts. The regulatory framework on water resources appears to confirm this subordinate position of customary water rights in some cases. For example, under section 2(iii) of the Water Resources decree, any person who “has a statutory or customary right of occupancy to any land, may take and use water from the underground water source or if abutting on the bank of any water course, from that water course, without charge for domestic purposes, for watering livestock and for personal irrigation schemes.” The authority of local governments grants customary rights of occupancy in land to any person for grazing or ancillary agricultural purposes. However, such customary rights of occupancy are made subject to the statutory rights of occupancy, which State Governors are empowered to grant. As provided unambiguously in section 5 of the Land use Statute, “Upon the grant of such a statutory right of occupancy, all existing rights to the use and occupation of the land subject to the statutory right of occupancy are extinguished.” The broad regulatory power of the government in connection with land and groundwater use may adversely affect customary rights. The Water Resources decree enables the government to define the times and manner at which water

may be taken, prohibit the taking of water for health reasons or even revoke customary rights in the public interest. Similarly, under section 28 of the Land Use Act, any right of occupancy, including customary rights of occupancy, is subject to revocation for overriding public interest which is defined to include “the requirement of land for mining purposes or oil pipelines” or the requirement of land for public purposes by the Federal, state or local governments. However, it would be a mistake to assume in all cases that customary rights would always be subordinate to statutory rights. Significantly, under section 2 of the Water Resources decree, “any person may (i) take water without charge for his domestic purpose or for watering his livestock from any water course to which the public has free access; or (ii) may use water for the purpose of fishing or for navigation to the extent that such use is not inconsistent with any other law for the time being in force...” Because the term free access has not been defined, it is an open question whether the issue of access to water for domestic purposes should also be determined by taking into account customary law rights (Kuruk, no date). To the extent customary law rules are relevant, potentially there could be a conflict between a user who claims a right to use water for domestic purposes under the Water resources decree but which is resisted by a community group that claims to restrict access under their customary rules. It is unclear in this case how the issue will ultimately be resolved.

These scenarios impose heavy challenges on the survival of State policies and projects. Government water policies and projects are always perceived as a systematic way of eroding traditional values of natural resources. Hence, the probability of such projects and policies succeeding

remains very low because of mass resistance often put up by affected communities. Where spiritual worldviews on water prevail in a community, imposing a system of modern solution to a problem always conflict, rather than cohere. The problem is that dual system of governing resources and the people, as exemplified in traditional and modern governance, can never succeed without any conscious efforts at harmonizing the two. It is important to recognize that where spiritual view of water prevails, community-driven management system seems to be very strong. This is because the state's modern approach of solving water problems does not always conform to local beliefs, norms and expectations. This situation plays out very clearly in the persistent conflicts characterizing the Cross River Basin Development Authority (CRBDA) and its local host communities at Abak and Itu over modern water supply and irrigation project of the state (Akpabio, 2010). While the state projects carry certain elements of cost recovery and privatization of some project operations, the local communities see such elements as out of order with their belief of water as a "free gift from nature," according to which no cost should be imposed on use. These positions have created tensions and conflicts between the CRBDA and the local host communities, and the goals of the state project remain largely unachieved. This outcome is in line with a rapidly growing body of evidence that development activities that work with and through local indigenous structures have several important advantages over projects that operate outside them (Matowanyika 1991; Warren 1992; Gadgil et al. 1993; Bernard and Kumalo 2004; Ingold 2005). While state institutions assume a universal set of formalized principles, non-state institutions are locally and informally rooted. In the study area, it was seen that

the locally rooted water management norms and beliefs were likely to be at odds with state water management principles, to the extent that imposing a modern system of solutions to water problem always caused conflict. The imposition of commodity values, even if it is ostensibly done for the good of the community involved, often directly threatens the spiritual and social integrity of the area. This is because it alters concepts of ownership and exchange of resources that, in turn, govern the nature of these spiritual and social relationships. To attempt to limit water use or impose a tariff is to limit the people's entitlements to life, disconnect them from nature, as well as threaten their existence and livelihoods.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The study has offered one example of the importance of culture in transmitting meanings and perceptions about water which, in turn, shape management practices adopted. Local beliefs emerge of the need to protect water sources, and have also become the basis for mediating local relationships. In essence, this role has had immense impact in the evolution of local governance for the benefit of traditional societies. Agencies of the State should be more interested in developing a better understanding of how the local cultures affect relationships with nature, to be able to adapt, policies, laws and project implementation to suit local cultural circumstances. Given that local institutions of water governance may not fully guarantee equity, natural justice and universal access, there is the need for encouraging partnership between local communities and the State for mutual benefit and sustainable state project and policies. As streams give rise to governance spaces, it follows that numerous traditional practices of a given community

revolves around specific streams which directly and indirectly contribute to the livelihood ecology of the people. In such contexts, formal policies, laws and programmes of the state should remain sensitive and possibly adaptive to such traditional norms and practice.

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