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Symbolic Water Imagery in the Drama of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo

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Abstract

This essay examines symbolic water imagery in the drama of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo. It is necessitated by the lack of a critical enquiry into that aspect of the renowned dramatist's creative use of water imagery, its literal and figurative counterparts having been examined already. Hinged on the theory of imagery, the study observes that Clark-Bekederemo is adept at manipulating locally-derived imagery in his drama, and that water imagery forms the nucleus of that local imagination. The study discovers that the symbolic water images used in the plays are largely conventional, but that in spite of their conventionality, the playwright deploys them to such private purposes as the enhancement of the plays' tragic import, the reinforcement of their Ijaw settings, and the enunciation of the socio-religious and cultural life of the same society, whose citizens constitute the bulk of the plays' dramatis personae. It concludes by stressing

that symbolic water imagery is an integral and functional component of Clark-Bekederemo's dramatic imagination.

Key words: Imagery, Symbolism, Water, Drama, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo

Introduction

John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo is a Nigerian writer of the first generation. He straddles the genres of poetry and drama in his literary creativity. He has to his credit nine known plays including *Song of a Goat* (1961), *The Masquerade* (1964) and *The Raft* (1964) published together as *Three Plays* in 1964; *Ozidi* (1966); *The Boat* (1981), *The Return Home* (1985) and *Full Circle* (1985) published together as *The Bikoroa Plays* in the same 1985; *The Wives Revolt* (1991); and *All for Oil* (2000). All the plays, except *The Wives' Revolt*, which is considered the author's only comedy, are tragedies of sorts. The corpus boasts a rife critical attention, but in spite of this, there has remained a slight vacuum in the area of the author's use of symbolic water imagery. This study is, therefore, significant first, as a plug in that critical hole, and second, as a testimony to one aspect of creative ingenuity in which Nigerian drama may be considered as having had an edge over its poetry (and perhaps prose), especially if the following observation by the critic, Charles Nnolim, is to be taken seriously. In a review of Greg Mbajiorgu's *Water Testaments: Anthology of Poems on Water and Water-related Issues*, Nnolim accuses the Nigerian poet of imaginative myopia in relation to his creative use of water imagery. According to him:

...because we are not a sea-faring nation, dealing with expanses of water eludes us. *Water Testaments*, it will be clearly seen, cannot deal with water vistas, expenses [sic], and the immensity of water because water is seen by us only in streams, rivers, rainfall, and ponds. For example, there is no imagery of water as a death-dealing agent in storms, at sea or in its terrors during a tsunami. This is part of our imaginative myopia or rather timidity because our lives are so confined to landmass (55).

Incidentally, the hallmark of Clark-Bekederemo's dramatic creativity rests on his masterful manipulation of locally derived imagery chief of which is that of water; and this penchant for water imagery derives from his being a native of the Ijaw stock of the Western Niger Delta, which is a water environment. In this environment:

the Niger River and 21 Rivers braid into hundreds of channel rivulets and creeks, irregular islands and peninsulas draining into the Atlantic Ocean. These water channels are responsible for the swampy nature of the region since nearly half of the territory is permanently under water for most of the year... It is the outlet of the Niger that enters Nigeria

in the northwest and flows southward through tropical rain forest and swamps into the Gulf of Guinea. Two tributaries, the Forcados and the Nun, gave rise to 22 distributaries for the free flow of the Niger into the Gulf of Guinea. The distributaries are the Mahin, Benin, Escravos, Ramos, Dodo, Pennington, Middleton, Digatoro, Bangatora, Kulama, Fishtown, Sangana, Brass, St. Nicholas, Santa Barbara, San Bartholomew, Sombreiro, New Calabar, Bonny, Andoni, Imo and Qua Ibo rivers (Enemugwem 2).

As B. L. Nyananyo, I. Daminabo and E. R. Aminigo rightly observe, “the Ijo in their homeland and in the Diaspora, have their settlements/communities closest to the rivers and oceans of the world” (13). To the Ijaw, therefore, water is everything. Thus, like their creator, Clark-Bekederemo’s dramatis personae, most of whom are Ijaw personages, live, move, and have their beings in the surrounding waters including the sea and the ocean. So, apart from the fact that their speech is coloured by imagery drawn from water environments and experiences, their lifestyles are also largely influenced by the surrounding waters. Thus, Clark-Bekederemo in his dramatic imagination recreates these realities of his traditional milieu, and the fascinating result becomes a theatre that is inundated by water imagery of diverse forms and categories.

Categorising Water and Water Imagery in the Drama of Clark-Bekederemo

Water in Clark-Bekederemo’s drama could be categorized as follows: water rooted in the soil and covering expanses of space with examples as the sea, ocean, river, creek, canal, stream, lake, and pond; water from the sky or atmosphere like rain, dew, and mist; and water in containers and pipes. These water categories, their attributes and functions combine to give out different images of the natural phenomenon, and one Nigerian scholar has made a typological delineation of these images into the literal, the figurative and the symbolic (Ngwoke, “Water and Animal Imagery” 145). But while the literal and figurative types of the water imagery have received considerable attention in Egbe Ifie’s *A Cultural Background to the Plays of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo* and Omeh Ngwoke’s “Water and Animal Imagery in the Drama of Clark-Bekederemo,” the symbolic category, which is yet unexamined is the focus of this essay. In the light of this, it becomes pertinent, at this point, to explain what is meant when imagery is said to be symbolic.

The tripartite typological delineation of imagery in modern scholarship into the literal, the figurative and the symbolic owes to the different linguistic modes of its realisation. Therefore, the first type consists of images expressed in ordinary, everyday language; the second in figures of speech; and the third in symbolic words and expressions. The types consist in what scholars have designated as imagery’s basic components including “image,” “metaphor” and “symbol,” respectively. Beyond manner of

expression, the types are differentiated by the degrees of their referencing or representations of objects, events and situations in the real world. According to Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson, “An image means only what it is; the figurative term in a metaphor means something other than what it is; and a symbol means what it is and something more, too. A symbol, that is, functions literally and figuratively at the same time” (735). And in the words of Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker and George Perkins:

Images standing for single things in nature tend to represent the world in simple, primary terms. When an image is made to stand for two things, as when a rose represents itself and also the color in a young woman’s cheeks, the image turns into a metaphor, simile or other forms of figurative language. When an image is used so as to suggest complex or multiple meanings, as when a rose represents itself, young women generally, and also beauty and fragility, it becomes a symbol (236).

Since our interest in this essay lies with symbolic imagery, the main object of which we have identified as the symbol, it would be necessary to also try to understand what a symbol really is and why it could function as an image. According to M. H. Abrams:

In broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something else; in this sense, all words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term “symbol” is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself (358).

A symbolic word or expression (or just a symbol) is an image simply because it evokes a mental picture of the things it refers to. The difference between a symbolic image and the other types (the literal and the figurative) is that a symbolic image has the capacity to extend its imagism since the evoked reality suggests other levels of meaning. A flag, for instance, has the image of a piece of cloth with colour patches, but its symbolic reference extends its meaning beyond a piece of cloth to that of a nation and even more.

Furthermore, scholars have observed that symbols could be conventional (traditional or public) or private (personal). When they stand for the same things for people of different cultures, tribes, or races, the symbols are said to be conventional or traditional. Instances are the colours: red, white and blue, which signify danger, purity and romance respectively; the cross which stands for the Christian religion; the crescent moon and star which constitute the symbol of Islam. However, when a writer uses conventional symbols in a way that new meanings are associated with them, or when he creates new ones for their own specific purposes, we say that such a writer is using private or personal symbols. A symbol, Louis observes, may appear in a work of literature in a

number different ways to suggest a number of different things. Most commonly, according to the scholar, a symbol will present itself in the form of a word, a figure of speech, an event, the total action, or a character (para. 1). The dramatic corpus under study and the phenomenon in focus (which is water imagery) boast a wide range of these forms as would be observed presently.

Water Symbolism and World Literature

As already noted, a symbol functions either conventionally or privately. The same is true when a symbol is used as an image. Some of the conventional symbolic images of water include: baptism, rebirth, and life sustainer. Also, water, one scholar notes, washes away guilt, represents the origin of life, regeneration, and is a vehicle of cleansing; and the river symbolizes fluidity of life, stream of life and death (Louis, para. 1). According to John Gregory Brown:

Water is, of course, mutable and sublime, sustaining and destructive, and throughout literature water serves as a representation not only of birth but of death, not merely of placidity but of violence. Water transports the hero to his great adventures and carries him home. Water holds the promise both of freedom and of enslavement, its shimmering surface inviting, its depths mysterious and daunting. ("Literature and Water," para. 2)

And in his own words, Kalu Uka observes that "Water acquires a ritualistic symbolism for all, and for life - tides ebb as in death; they rise, as in birth; the river flows, as life ..." (77).

It is perhaps as a private symbol that water's fluidity becomes even more astonishing. Michael Ferber notices, for instance, that "... In different moods, Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay finds the sea a mother and a destroyer..." (180-181); and that Gillan Koh identifies the "green water" in the first painting in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* as symbolizing death by drowning; and "a swollen sea" as representing impending danger (182). Worthy of note in the above and beyond is the fact that in all its creative manifestations, water imagery has served writers across generations as the conveyor of messages and transporter of ideas to the reader. And just as in the handling of most other images, the manipulation of water imagery depends to a large extent on a writer's experience in water affairs. As has been noted, Clark-Bekederemo is versed in water affairs being a home-grown Ijaw man, hence his use of water imagery in his drama depicts a robust versatility.

Symbolic Water Imagery in the Drama of Clark-Bekederemo

The symbolic images of water in Clark-Bekederemo's drama are more conventional than private, unlike their literal and figurative counterparts, which are more private than

conventional. This is not because the symbolic images “have a previously agreed upon meaning” (Louis 1), but because they suggest ideas more universal than private. Prominent among these in the corpus under study are images of water as a dangerous phenomenon and a death-dealing agent, as a transportation highway, a playground or ceremonial arena, a purifier, a curative agent, and as home to spirits. Interestingly, each of these images is deployed to enunciate the tragic import of the individual plays in addition to aiding the espousal of the social, religious and cultural life of the Ijaw people of Nigeria’s Niger Delta.

Water as a Dangerous Phenomenon and Death-Dealing Agent

The imagery of water as a dangerous phenomenon and a death-dealing agent is perhaps the most prevalent in the drama of Clark-Bekederemo. The water category more associated with danger is the first, which consists of water rooted in the soil and occupying some expanse of space. In Clark-Bekederemo’s drama, these water types manifest their danger through such familiar agents as the whirlpools, turbulent waves, storms, swift ebb tides and certain harmful creatures that inhabit it. “The sea,” writes Michael Ferber, “has always been alien and dangerous” (179). The sea’s dangerousness is particularly obvious considering its vastness and terrifying depth. Like the sea, every water kind in this first category is potentially dangerous. Even though he walks into it on his own accord, Zifa, the protagonist of *Song of a Goat*, dies all the same, at the sea, and there is something significantly threatening about the sea’s reaction at the very moment. Elevated to the status of a human, the sea is said to have moaned (4) when it gulped Zifa. This obviously suggests an assuagement of hunger and a desire for more of such a sumptuous meal.

Unlike the situation in *Song of a Goat*, the dangerous image of water of the first category pervades *The Raft*. While it is the sea that is portrayed in the former, it is the creek that one encounters in the latter. In *The Raft*, as in other plays of the author where it is evoked, the dangerous image of water, as has been noted, functions to heighten some of the play’s tragic imports. All the characters in *The Raft* except of course, Ogro (the home boy), have no skill in swimming, thus, the creek down which they drift pose so much danger to them. They are in perpetual fear of drowning, and that is partly why Kengide once warns Ibobo, “Don’t fall over into the waters in/Your excitement” (124) when the fellow gets too excited over sighting a port. The creek that forms the background of *The Raft* is murky and precarious, thus journeying in it in an uncontrolled raft as the lumbermen do is dangerous, worse of all at night. As Kengide once tells the crew: “it’s dangerous sailing/A raft down the creeks at night” (127).

Perhaps the most vicious vehicle of water’s hazard is the whirlpool, whose appearance in *The Raft* drives the tragic vision of the play to some kind of a climax. In that accursed journey, the lumbermen drift into the *Osikoboro whirlpool* and get themselves

inextricably entangled in its grip. The level of the threat posed by the whirlpool is reflected in the character victims' description of the phenomenon. Something of the whirlpool's horror is evoked when Kengide announces: "It means we are in the arms/Of the great *Osikoboro whirlpool/Itself*". But it is when Olotu describes it as "The drain pit of all the earth" (104) and Ogro alleges "we may never find release/From its vice!" (101) that the reader appreciates the magnitude of the phenomenon's threat to the life of its victims. It has been observed that *The Raft* is an allegory of the post independence Nigeria of the mid-sixties, and I have noted elsewhere that the four lumbermen signify the three major ethnic groups and all the minorities put together. Thus, in addition to generally symbolising the threatening vicissitudes of life, the described whirlpool represents the turbulent situations of the mid-sixties in Nigeria, which culminated in the bloody civil war. Thus, the lumbermen's annihilation becomes a metaphor for the carnage experienced in the country's civil war.

The storm is another vehicle of the dangerous image of water in Clark-Bekederemo's drama. To water users, it is a nightmare and perhaps the swiftest killer since it has the capacity not only to capsize boats and other water vessels, but also to sweep seamen to undesired destinations and to wet victims and materials thereby causing diseases. Ironically, the lumbermen in *The Raft* herald the coming of the storm seeking to ride on its back to safety. They intend for it to sweep them out of the whirlpool by blowing against the sail, but it rather speeds up the play's first tragic incident. Blowing against the poorly made sail, the stormy wind splits the raft and facilitates the sweeping of Olotu to the sea on the small half of the craft. The situation is paradoxically couched in Ogro's speech and the succeeding stage direction:

OGRO: Now give a loud shout, boys. Our raft
Is moving again – behind a big bellyful
Of tornado – Oh, shout for joy!

[At this point, a loud creak, then a brief cracking sound, and the raft breaks in two, the portion with the billowing sail pulling furiously away. On it is Olotu.] (111)

The waves are the next harbingers of the hazards of water. Therefore, the association of the risk at sea to the waves is archetypal. Across the plays of Clark-Bekederemo, horrendous pictures are painted of the waves. In *The Boat*, Biowa describes the sea waves as "wanton" (18) and graphically paints horrifying pictures of them when he says (recounting his experience in his journey home to Kiagbodo from Lagos) that "the wind, inflamed by lightning and thunder, drives [waves] over tree-tops" (5). Water users dread the waves; sea farers pray never to encounter them; and an unlucky, unsuspecting swimmer caught in its grip either gets drowned or is swept by it to sea, if not killed instantly by being rammed against a hard object in the water. Reckless waves

have the capacity to overturn boats (of course “when a canoe capsizes we know the inventory is never again complete” *The Boat* 62). Burubo’s assertion that “it is not every day a prince comes home safe from the seas (3) also alludes to the danger of waves at sea, just as the wild celebration at the beginning of the play when Biowa returns from Lagos *en route* the waters is partly because of his safe trip in spite of the rampaging waves. Little wonder, then, the Niger Company boat cannot come to the rescue of the helpless crew on board the drifting raft because of fear of “*the waves stirred up in their wake*” (117).

Next to the waves in danger is the ebb tide. Despite its advantage to water users, the *ebb tide* often comes in a fierce current that makes a riding craft difficult to control. We recall Ogro’s fear in spite of Kengide’s joyful anticipation that the coming ebb tide will sweep them out of the dangerous Osikoboro whirlpool. Ogro’s fear is born of the speed of the “swift ebb tide” that combines “the current of seven rivers”, and like Ibobo he fears the tide will likely “take us to sea” (104). According to Ibobo:

... It seems
To me if their combined current can sweep
Us out here, it will not stop till we are
Past Age and right in the ocean. (104-105)

The damage of the jointly owned boat in *The Boat* is a practical demonstration of the fierceness of the ebb tide. As Biowa explains to his angry brother, the boat got damaged “when we tried to dock at Ereko” and “misjudged our speed combined with that of the *ebbing tide*” (117). It would be recalled that the conflict that culminates in the play’s tragic denouement has a link with the damage on the boat caused by the ebbing tide and wanton waves at the sea route of the duo’s trade. Interesting is how the duo’s antagonism compares to the sea’s turbulence. In their rage, the brothers show lack of reasoning and exhibit deafness to all voices of caution, hence driving this madness to their own deaths.

Some aquatic creatures also make the waters risky. In the creek on which the raft drifts live such harmful creatures as sharks, crocodiles, alligators, manatees, hippopotamuses, leeches and star fishes. The characters in *The Raft* are not ignorant of this situation hence at different times they caution one another against the danger posed by these water creatures. Here then lies the significance of Ibobo’s warning to Ogro, “remove your leg out of water quick. Do/You want some shark or crocodile to snatch at it? (105); and Kengide’s verbal restraint on Ogro who attempts to swim to Olotu’s rescue: “You young fool, don’t you see a school/Of sharks prowling the place?” (112).

Apart from being a dangerous phenomenon, water of the kinds that we have mentioned also prove to either be the place of death or represent death out-rightly. Both in calm and turbulent times, waters of the first category prove dangerous. We will recall that Zifa, the tragic hero of the author's first play, dies at the sea. It is assumed that Tufa in *The Masquerade* also ends in the Forcados River. The entire crew in *The Raft* perishes in water: Olotu, Kengide and Ibobo at the sea, and Ogrope in the creek down which the raft drifts. And, of course, Biowa is made to drown in the Forcados River as penalty for killing his brother. In all, we reiterate that Clark-Bekederemo's theatre owes much of its resounding tragic inclination to the waters that form the background setting of the individual plays.

Symbolically speaking, the dangerous image of water speaks of the perils of life. Life with its entire vicissitudes is likened to a sea journey. The sea in this instance becomes a metaphor for all the water kinds that make up our first category including the ocean, river, creek, stream, lake and pond. Invariably, Clark-Bekederemo's drama is concerned with man and the problems of living, and the Niger Delta environment which is characterized by its abundance of water affords him the best materials for expressing this absolute perception of life.

Water as Transportation Highway

Enmeshed in water's dangerousness is its image as a transportation highway. As the forgoing discussion reveals, the waters in our first category become dangerous to humans when they venture into it, and one of the reasons for humans' venturing into such vast water types as the sea and ocean is to utilize them as platform for conveying persons, goods and services from one destination to another. This highway image of water is prevalent in the drama of Clark-Bekederemo as communities within the Ijaw setting of most of the plays are seldom linked by roads due to their predominantly marshy terrain.

Seafaring is a common activity among the Ijaw characters in the drama under study. Zifa is, for instance, an accomplished seafarer. As a fisherman and a part-time pilot of a Niger Company boat, Zifa traverses the Niger Delta rivers, creeks and sea up to the Atlantic Ocean. Like her husband, Ebire is also a constant user of the waterways. She goes to markets distant and near, by rowing or being rowed on boats through the creeks and rivers. Similarly, the creek setting of *The Raft* is the lumbermen's route for lumbering wood between the jungles (backwaters) of the Niger Delta and the cities like Warri and Sapele. The general European presence in all the plays is made possible by the waterways because at the time of the plays' setting, there was no air transportation into what would later become Nigeria. In the early plays, that presence is symbolized by the Niger Company boats and ships constantly "tearing the bowel" of the waters.

In *The Masquerade*, Diribi promises Titi, “I will take boat with you myself, sail all/The creeks beat virgin paths on land/And sea to find my daughter the best man” (69). The merchant brothers in *The Boat* constantly ply the waterways on their business trips. In fact, the play opens with Biowa’s berthing at the mouth of the Kiagbodo River from his trip of Lagos, and when Bradide asks him “How did you come?” he says, “By water of course.” When later the conflict between the brothers heightens, Sanfio recalls that “for such acts and desires brothers roved endless waters to found new dynasties” (25).

There is reason to believe that in *Ozidi*, the hero’s journey down to Orua from Ododama for his revenge mission is by water. It would be recalled that when the young hero demands to know his father’s whereabouts, he is told that his father resides in a far away town, which takes “several days/Hard paddling” (35) to get to. This brings to mind Brown’s earlier statement that “Water transports the hero to his great adventures and carries him home.” Noteworthy also is that it is by water that the protagonist in *All for Oil* makes his business and political trips. And incidentally, that play opens with the natives from the downstream region itching to “catch the ebb tide home” (1) from Warri after a regatta.

The highway image of water x-rayed above obviously accounts for the cultural rootedness of the plays of Clark-Bekederemo, as well as their setting in the Niger Delta environment. Elsewhere, I have noted that Clark-Bekederemo’s choice of imagery in his drama is local, unlike the situation in his poetry where he combines local and foreign images. Thus, the image of crisscrossing waterways in the plays authenticates their Ijaw settings, while reminding the reader that Clark-Bekederemo’s Ijaw characters (most of them are) are just at home in water as they are on land. Among the home-dwelling Ijaw of the time of the plays’ settings, to think of a journey is to think of water, and as in road or air transportation, safety and mishap are part of water transportation. Thus, to the Ijaw, the acquisition of skills in boat rowing, punting and other means of water transportation is an integral part of a child’s socialization.

Water as Playground/Ceremonial Arena

Depicted also in Clark-Bekederemo’s drama is the fact that beyond functioning as a platform for transportation, waters in the first category also serve leisure purposes for the people of the Niger Delta. Obviously, life in the riverine Niger Delta communities is life in water. Thus, playing on and in water is part of the people’s culture especially the Ijaw. The surrounding creeks and rivers in Clark-Bekederemo’s drama in addition to serving other utilitarian purposes function as playgrounds for children. Painting a vivid picture of his boyhood escapades in the creeks, Ogro, the homegrown Ijaw character among the lumbermen once tells his colleagues:

Back in my home town, the boys all swim
Far out of stream to board the boats as they pass
By, and the good people... then
And only then is it time to take the final plunge,
Your arms full of gifts from the captain... (117)

The same venue also hosts communal events involving adults like festivals and other ceremonies. The plot of *All for Oil* opens with talks about a just-concluded regatta in the Warri River; and according to Bekederemo, a character in the play, “A regatta is supposed to be a festival” (467). Originally, a regatta is a sport event in water performed in boats and other water vessels, but among the riverine Niger Delta, its purpose extends beyond sports activities to include cultural and ceremonial displays. Writing about Niger Delta inhabitants and regattas, Martha Anderson notes as follows: “Nowadays, regattas are held on a wide variety of occasions and serve many different purposes, in addition to providing spectacular entertainment... Communities stage regattas to highlight festivals or honor visits by important dignitaries” (341). The regatta in *All for Oil* is ceremonial and specifically staged to entertain a political figure, Sir (later Lord) Fredrick Lugard, on the occasion of his tour of the Southern Province of Nigeria (461).

“Those who have made [the sea] a second home” writes Ferber, “have learned special skills and habits” (179). Such are the skills of homegrown Ijaw citizens, which Clark-Bekederemo replicates in his drama. The regatta performances described in *All for Oil* is one of such instances in which the author depicts the people’s proficiency in water affairs as it involves not just displays inside the boats, but “wad[ing] into the waters” (467)

Water as a Purifying Agent

The role of water as a purifier is another image of the natural phenomenon that is explored in the drama of Clark-Bekederemo. Across cultures and ages, water has remained the undisputed agent of purification, thus serving a religious purpose. Water is used for purification at most religious rites. The Christian baptism is one of such cleansing rituals; and the Islamic ablution that preludes each prayer is another. Traditional African religious rites are no exception as many literary works steeped in the religio-cultural life of African societies, as most of Clark-Bekederemo’s plays do, depict this practice and image. In Clark-Bekederemo’s plays, ritual sacrifices to gods are preceded by a water cleansing rite as in *Song of a Goat* where Zifa’s family is to be cleansed by water before the symbolic sacrifice of the goat. The following dialogue between “mother” and son is evident:

ORUKORERE: ... Here, you see this

Calabash? I have laid fern fronds

Over it, and the white soil of Edo

Has turned to *mere* in it already

ZIFA: I do not need *cleansing*; perhaps others do. (33)

Similarly, the home-calling ritual in *The Return Home* partly involves washing the wooden figures (representing the two dead brothers, Bradie and Biowa) to make them pure before burial. The scene of the play involving the cleansing ritual is rightly entitled "Ablution." Thus, as an elder, Maika, informs the reader concerning the rites, "First we cleanse with blood, then we wash with *water* ... before decking them out as newly borns" (83). Tonwe had said earlier that the washing is to cleanse the dead of their ills. Usually, the water involved in the cleansing ritual is clean water. This is why the Christian baptism is a natural clean water business, just as the Islamic ablution ritual is. The need for naturalness is highlighted by the frequent use of the river and of other flowing water kinds for such rituals. It is interesting to know that even in the traditional Ijaw religio-cultural rites of purification, that image of the river as source of natural water is underscored. Apele, a peer of the cousins calling home their dead fathers, reminds the group: "The last time we did it for Diribi, we dipped him in the river first as a new born baby" (82). The use of the natural flow of the river emphasizes the belief that as the water flows, it carries away guilt and impurities, and renews the person/object undergoing the cleansing.

The exploration of the imagery of water as a purifying agent in Clark-Bekederemo's drama is an eloquent testimony to the playwright's rootedness in the religious culture of his traditional Ijaw people.

Water as a Palliative/Curative Agent

Another significant image of water in the drama under study is that of a palliative or curative agent. Water is a curative agent when it is used as medicine. In traditional societies, hot water played and still plays that role of medicine for cold and body injuries. Clark-Bekederemo replicates that medicine image of hot water in *Ozidi*, specifically in the duel between Ozidi and Ofe. At a point in the course of that fight, Ofe demands hot water as solution to his sudden cold:

OFE: [*Ozidi deals him a blow and he falls writhing on the ground.*]

Suddenly, I'm cold, very cold.

My wives, are you there at my side?

I am cold, so cold, bring me hot water, do you hear me?
 Bring hot water and bath my brows running as a molten brook
 Ofe will fight no more,
 No, no, not in this cold (87-88)

In the same play, the playwright also imbues ordinary (cold) water with the same medicinal potency. When he comes down with yaws at the end of his mission, young Ozidi is cured with clean water. Orea reveals this in some kind of soliloquy:

OREA: Here's common water then, here's common soap,
 And here is sponge crushed from leaves of plantain
 I need nothing more before I scrub dry a mere riot of yaws
 Broken over my son. (120)

Neighbours in *Full Circle* also demand water to revive the dying Kari:

NEIGHBOURS: He's dying! Yes, he's dying, somebody bring water quick.
 Water, water, water! (124)

Home to Spirits and Ancestors

The image of water as home to spirits and ancestors is also prevalent in the drama of Clark-Bekederemo. Most of the Ijaw gods and ancestors are believed to inhabit the waters and it may not be out of place to think that this is the reason why their human protégées are as safe in water as on land. Almost all the plays of Clark-Bekederemo depict this phenomenon, which is a direct reference to the people's religious life. The gods from the sea are believed to be responsible for Orukorere's partial insanity, which is punishment for her refusing to serve them. All the references in the different plays to the mermaid indirectly allude to the same status of the different waters as abode to aquatic spirits. *Ozidi* opens with a sacrifice at the sea euphemistically meant for "the people of the sea" who are both hosts and guests. According to the STORY TELLER at the beginning of the play:

... we must first have a sacrifice to placate our hosts from *the sea*...
 And the seven girls we ask of you, all virgins mind you, alone can bear
 offerings to our guests from *the sea*, and to establish a bridge (1).

Later in the same play, Ozidi's attendant informs his master that "...Plenty people way you day see for market na proper spirit from *watah*, nor be man-pickin at all at all" (67).

While the Orukorere circumstance and the attendant's information are deployed by the playwright partly to reinforce the belief system of the Ijaw, the sacrificial activity in *Ozidi* is a means to restore the religious content of the play's source myth, which the different field raconteurs who performed the original myth for Clark-Bekederemo failed to re-enact. In all, therefore, Clark-Bekederemo's drama depicts the Ijaw people's inclination to the surrounding waters as home their gods, ancestors and other spirits.

Conclusion

Emerging from the foregoing study is the conclusion that J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's drama is one that is steeped in symbolic water imagery examples of which include water as a dangerous phenomenon and death-dealing agent, a transportation highway, a playground or ceremonial arena, a purifier, a curative agent, and as home to spirits. The imagery's pervasive presence in the said drama owes to the playwright's origin and upbringing in the predominantly aquatic environment of the Western Niger Delta area of Nigeria. Perhaps the most interesting among the emerging facts is that even though these water symbols/images are largely conventional (universal), the playwright manipulates them for some private purposes including the strengthening of the tragic import of his plays, the authentication of the religious and cultural life of the Ijaw people and the reinforcement of the geographical setting of the individual plays.

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