The literary production of Flora Nwapa (1931-1993), the first Nigerian woman novelist, covers a long period of Nigerian history. In her first novels, *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), she portrayed the life of a rural community in the area of Ugwuta (or Oguta) in Igboland at the end of the '40s; then she described the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), with the stories of the Biafran secessionists, in her novel *Never Again* (1975), and finally she published the stories based in the cities of Onitsha and Lagos during the post-independence government and during the military interregnum which ended in the 1975 coup d'état (*This is Lagos and Other Stories*, 1971; *Wives at War and Other Stories*, 1980; *One is Enough*, 1986; *Women are Different*, 1986). We can therefore follow various generations of Igbo men, and mostly women, in very precise places and times, through the historical changes brought first by colonialism and then by independence, with all the problems and upheaval that they caused. Nwapa's aim is to let the readers know her people's traditions, so that they will be revalued and considered worth being respected. This explains why her novels have been defined sociological (Mojola 1989: 19) and are so rich in detailed information on the life and habits of the Igbo people, sometimes to such an extent as to generate hostility from critics. Eustace Palmer, for example, in his 1968 review of *Efuru*, blamed Nwapa for her "unnecessary sociological information" (1968: 57) and for her attempt to "embody the culture and spirit of her tribe" (1968: 57) through her characters. However, as it has been pointed out,

by calling the descriptions of 'the culture and spirit of her tribe' 'sociological information' he [Palmer] is erecting false categories and making a distinction between the physical world and the spiritual world. No such distinction operated within traditional Igbo society, which is precisely what Nwapa is trying to re-create. (Maja-Pearce 1985: 12)

Moreover, to understand modern African writers fully,

it is important to learn about the past to which they make constant reference, to know the political and social organisation of traditional African society and how these differ from what happens now. Above all, it is most important that readers should appreciate [...] African religious beliefs and attitudes in order to understand the literature. (Taiwo 1981: 29)
As the physical and the spiritual world cannot be separated, the writer often describes religious beliefs and practices as they are strictly connected with the everyday life of the people she is a spokeswoman of. Religious beliefs and needs accordingly change with the historical, social and cultural changes her novels testify. If the Igbo cosmology dominates in Efuru and Idu, the novels written afterwards show a crumbling of traditional religious beliefs, due above all to the action of the missionary schools attended by the characters of the novels. Moreover, in the writings published after Efuru and Idu, the Christian influence is sometimes mixed with the traditional faith, and is often a mere form bereft of any authentic spiritual meaning. In such cases the shallowness of the characters’ understanding of the Christian faith as well as the lack of traditional religious values add to the spiritual, mental and behavioural confusion of the characters, who are meant as examples of the uncertainty of a people who, deprived of its own culture, has badly absorbed values of a foreign culture.

The inhabitants of the rural community in the ‘40s are, then, less sceptical than those of Onitsha and Lagos in the ‘70s and 80s. They behave according to the handed down faith and following reassuring codes, showing, in so doing, an equilibrium which will be unknown to their descendants. Nwapa describes the pre-independence community in an analytical way, but without any nostalgia. The social and individual texture of the pre-independence community is described as strongly religious in its daily recurrences. Efuru and Idu highlight how there are

- two realms or orders of existence – The Supernatural (Ala Nmuo) and the natural world of visible order (Ala madu). There is no sharp line separating the two. The spirits are involved in the day to day affairs of men. [...] it is not correct to talk of a strict dichotomy of the natural and the supernatural worlds. They are just different orders of beings and existence which are in constant interaction and communication. (Uzodinna Nwala 1985: 31)

As a matter of fact, the theme of fate is central, not only in Efuru – as A. Maja-Pearce observes – but in most of Nwapa’s stories.

Nwapa is not concerned with individual psychology; she has not written a psychological novel in the manner of Achebe or Amadi, and any attempt to elicit concrete, material reasons for the behaviour of the characters in the novel [Efuru] is to approach it in terms of an alien, European system of beliefs, where individual psychology is paramount and where the gods have no place in the universe except as objects of “sociology” and as quaint, wrong-headed remnants of a backward, pre-colonial Africa. (Maja-Pearce 1985: 13-14)
Nwapa's knowledge of Igbo mythology and folklore is not, however, first hand, as the writer refers to the tales and stories handed down in her family:

Having been brought up by parents who had strong Christian beliefs and who rejected anything that was not Christian, I had a unique opportunity of living with my grandmother in a polygamous environment. She was one of seven wives and within a very short time I learnt a lot about things I would not have learnt if I were staying with my parents. My grandmother too was a Christian, but had been converted after having all her children, so that all the traditional practices and beliefs were still with her. (James 1991: 116).

The source of her knowledge is then oral and springs from a female tradition. Perhaps for this reason, Nwapa's novels express the woman's point of view and concentrate "on what was incidental or simply contextual to male action - domestic matters, politics of intimacy." (Boehmer 1991: 12-13) As the writer cares about women's culture, while talking about religion, she introduces elements which would strengthen her themes. Next to the usual religious figures we find, then, female deities which are relevant in the community life, and the writer often underlines signs of perplexity or doubts by her heroines towards traditional practices. The novels, however, respect the Igbo religious hierarchy transmitted by the predecessors: 'God', 'chi', 'ancestors', and 'gods'.

'God', named 'Chukwu' in Chinua Achebe's writings, but never so called by Nwapa, is the Supreme God, the Creator. Inscrutable and almighty, he is an abstract being which dominates the universe in incomprehensible ways; human beings are so distant from him that they cannot offer him sacrifices and need intermediate deities.

Chukwu is worshipped because he is so just that no sacrifice can influence or obstruct His justice, neither does He need or demand anything at all from man. The relationship of man to the gods and deities is like the relationship between a human employer and his employees. The Igbo believe that the universe is anthropocentric; therefore man can manipulate any other creations of Chukwu, including the gods, to his advantage by offering them some sort of sacrifice, especially kola. (Ogbaa 1992: 13)

The highest deity rarely interferes with human beings' business, this being a characteristic which makes him different from lesser deities and the ancestors. The typical Igbo sayings, translated by Nwapa into African English, still mirror the inherited tradition, but seem to refer to the image of a Western God, as they are quite vague: "Everything is in the hands of God" (Nwapa 1970: 14); "There is God, he understands everything" (Nwapa 1966: 77); "[...]only God knows" (Nwapa 1970: 25); "I thank God for that" (Nwapa 1970: 122); "God has blessed
the two young people." (Nwapa 1966: 22); "We are praying to God to save Adiewere. Unless God allows it, nothing will happen to my husband." (Nwapa 1970: 142); "God forbid" (Nwapa 1966: 164). 'God' is also present in adverbs such as, "When God gives you a rash, he also gives you nails to scratch it with." (Nwapa 1970: 121); "What God has written on your palm, that's what happens." (Nwapa 1970: 195).

Motherhood is a central theme in all the novels by Nwapa, and particularly in her first ones. "Childlessness is important as a spiritual issue in indigenous religions. It creates a gap in the antenatal-living-postmortem cycles that must be maintained for consonancy" (Okonojo Ogunyemi 1996: 136). Due to the relevance of motherhood and fertility, there are frequent references to God as to the one who decides about procreation: "God has given it [your child] to you, your wife conceived it in her womb [...]" (Nwapa 1966: 22); "[...] a child would come when God willed it:" (Nwapa 1966: 24). If God appears sometimes to be acting unjustly, granting children to women who have not always behaved in an unexceptionable way, and denying them to honest women — "These are the women who misused themselves, who were prostitutes, and now God has blessed them with children. Nobody can explain how things work out." (Nwapa 1970: 38) — Chukwu does in fact reward 'well-behaved women': "God remembered me and opened my womb" (Nwapa 1970: 55); "God is wonderful. Nothing baffles him." (Nwapa 1970: 194) [this last sentence being mentioned when Idu finds out she is pregnant once again]. As fertility is a common theme to all the works by Nwapa, we frequently find the highest deity quoted with reference to the desired pregnancies of her main characters also in novels written after Efuru and Idu. However, even if the word mentioned is the same (God), we can no longer recognize whether the writer is referring to a Christian or an Igbo God, as the quotation takes place in a very different cultural context: "Perhaps it was God's will [...] all the blessings of this world would come in God's good time." (Nwapa 1995a: 6).

Following the hierarchy of the Igbo cosmology, chi comes soon after Chukwu. It is the personal god every human being receives from Chukwu, when he or she is conceived.

[...] chi is man's double, linking him to Chukwu, his ancestors and the unborn, guarding, guiding, and protecting him in his activities during his lifetime; and chi is omniscient, can foresee danger, and is concerned only with the person with whom it remains through one lifetime. (Ogbaa 1992: 14)

This last characteristic seems to be confirmed by a cue in Idu when we read that "One mother can bear two children in her womb, but one chi cannot belong to the two children." (Nwapa 1970: 4). Human beings are, therefore, a reflection of
their personal god, who is their double, even if a chi is stronger than men or women as it is a spirit.

The Igbo Chi and the Yoruba Ori modify the discursive forces, encouraging the individual to become discerning and to glean steadfastly information on the systemic ordering of life. Chi and Ori convert the religious discourses constructed around their worship of deities into a psychological discourse, while still retaining vestiges of the religious. [...] it is essence, innateness, instinct, genetics, luck, endowment, destiny, empowerment; it is the caretaker and caregiver installed within. (Ogonjo Ogynyemi 1996: 35-36)

A chi's role is dynamic, it being in turn a creator, fate or destiny. Similar to a guardian angel – it is "also the light within, which illuminates the dark recesses of one's life" (Ogonjo Ogynyemi 1996: 42) – a chi controls, for better or for worse, the lot of the person whose life has been entrusted to it ("She could not attribute their poverty to laziness. Her husband was not lazy. It was their chi that was responsible." (Nwapa 1966: 167); "Her chi saved her." (Nwapa 1970: 28); "My chi does not take care of me. My chi has left me." (Nwapa 1966: 172)) and completes the destiny allotted by Chukwu: ""What you are saying is that it is his chi that has made him like that?" said Nwasobi. "Yes, of course. What is responsible? He did not create himself."" (Nwapa 1970: 30). Despite their faith in the concept of predestination, which is inherent in Igbo cosmology, Igbo people believe that destiny can be changed, as a chi has the authority to negotiate with the creator on behalf of the human being, improving therefore his/her conditions. Sacrifices are then absolutely necessary:

After this, he killed a white cock for his chi and his wife also killed a cock for her own chi. Their chi had saved them from death[...] (Nwapa 1966: 102).

Moreover, while waiting to take bodily form or to be reincarnated, a person has the possibility to choose the type of life he or she wants to have, and such a choice is afterwards confirmed by Chukwu, and the chi. A bad chi may, therefore, depend on the wrong choice made by the individual before being born:

Since the Igbo believe in this myth of free will and choice at creation, it becomes proper for them to talk of bad chi not as a criticism of God's ordination of man's life in a certain way, but as that of a man who makes the bad choice, even if that choice was made in ala mmo (the spirit world) before birth. (Ogonjo Ogynyemi 1996: 17)
The wrong behaviour of human beings affects not so much their relationship with their chi, as the events predetermined by their chi. In such cases the blame falls entirely on the human being:

Her chi gave her the thirty pounds, and now that she has rejected the money which her chi gave her, her chi is sure to be angry and make her poor because of it. You don’t reject what your chi has given you. It is not done. I hope her chi is not angry with her. If he is, then she will never smell that sum again. (Nwapa 1966: 213).

Only once in the following novels by Nwapa does the image of chi return; it happens in the short story 'The Chief’s Daughter' in Wives at War:

His ‘chi’ gave him wealth but did not give him plenty of children [...] the chief kept asking his ‘chi’ why it did not make her a man so to replace him. (Nwapa 1992 : 85)

This short story shows traces of traditional religious beliefs only because it deals with the contrast between two generations, where the character of the father/master expresses values of the past which only he recognizes as precious.

The importance of ancestors in Igbo religious life is linked to the idea of chi, of reincarnation, and of life after death. Every human being has his/her double in the world of the spirits; this double may be an ancestor who has to be honoured as it might be reincarnated in the family. Ancestors belong to the world of the living, of the dead, and of those who have still to be born. They are entitled to having altars, propitiatory sacrifices, rituals during guests' visits, and double funeral ceremonies. They protect their descendants, but may become angry with them: “We went to a dibia and he told us to go to town and sacrifice to our ancestors. He said that our ancestors were angry with us[...]” (Nwapa 1966: 59).

Spirits of nature or personifications of natural forces, 'gods' are sometimes local deities belonging to a village, and are nearer to human beings, also because they share human moods and states of mind: in this sense they remind us of Greek or Roman gods and goddesses. Even if the relationship is more direct, people often need to resort to a dibia, a half doctor, half diviner, half wizard figure. Generic references to gods are extremely frequent in Efuru and Idu: "The gods should have been propitiated by now." (Nwapa 1970: 117); "Didn't I say that our gods are awake: Didn't I warn that nobody should steal my things because our gods will visit the thief." (Nwapa 1966: 130)

Some of these deities have a particular importance in Nwapa's novels. They are often female deities connected with nature. Among them the most important one is the Woman of the Lake, also called with the Igbo name of Uhamiri and known as 'our mother' or 'Mammy water'. This is due to the fact that the rural community Nwapa is describing lives on the shore of the lake Uhamiri is owner
of, but also to the fact that the main theme of the novels is the importance of fertility and the role of childless women (and men) in the community, and that the goddess is seen as "a feminine symbol of chastity, a chastity which evolves as an indication of the natural growth of her heroines." (Durosini et al. 1994: 110). Uhamiri is goddess of an ancient religion based on matriarchy.

Like Amadi's Story of Ihuoma and the Sea King, the myth of Uhamiri is a water deity myth. Such myths feature prominently in the literature of Eastern Nigeria [...] the river goddess Idemili, in the guise of a male deity, figures in Things Fall Apart. In the same guise, she plays a more central role in Achebe's Arrow of God (1964), as the god of Ezeulu's main rival for authority over the clan. Reading Efuru dialogically through Achebe's novels highlights the strategies of resistance that are inscribed in Nwapa's novels. Nwapa's act of writing the myth of Uhamiri into her narrative draws attention to Achebe's error in gender ascription. For not only are Uhamiri and Idemili both water deities, but in the characteristics attributed to her, Uhamiri closely resembles Idemili as Amadiume describes her: a goddess who is associated with 'female industriousness' and 'prosperity'. (Stratton 1994: 89-90)

Nwapa, then, changes our perspective of looking at a religious image previously presented from a patriarchal point of view; the myth introduced by her celebrates a female ideology and a heritage based on matriarchy:

Nwapa has done a great literary service to Nigeria, by fictionalizing the Ugwuta goddess, Ogbuide, as Uhamiri. Coming from Ugwuta society, which worships Ogbuide as Big Mama, it is only natural that Nwapa should use her to spotlight people's liberation struggle from stultifying aspects of traditional life. [...] By infusing the spirit of Ogbuide/Uhamiri throughout all her works, Nwapa, who is Ugwuta to the core, produces some thought-provoking situations, for she portrays Uhamiri as the prototype of all independent women and a shining example of what women, particularly childless ones, should aspire to. (Okonjo Ogunyemi 1996: 140-141)

Efuru, the main character of the homonymous novel, is chosen by Uhamiri as her follower (the goddess has only women worshippers). As Uhamiri's followers are beautiful and rich, but childless, in a cultural system where giving birth is considered the main value of a woman, many questions arise. Is wealth and economic success a reward for renouncing fertility? Is the goddess protecting women, as she dispenses them from facing all the risks of child-bearing? Is she

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1 Stratton underlines how Uhamiri's myth should be compared with the myths of other water deities present in the works by Nigerian writers such as Okigbo and Soyinka.
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fighting against the traditional role of women as mothers and wives, substituting it with the role of a 'business woman'? Whatever the answers to these questions, a female model different from the traditional ones offered by the text, if not openly feminist, is certainly introduced by the writer through the goddess. Uhamiri, as a matter of fact, shows women a road to independence (economic above all), and the possibility of escaping the role of mother, which all the women in the novel are, otherwise, victims of. Moreover

Her beauty is neither for the seduction of men nor for the gratification of the male ego. Satisfied with, and at home in, the company of her fellow-women, she does not subject herself to male supremacy and its corollary, sexual exploitation. (Ikoné 1984: 75)

Efuru is also an expression of the continuity of a female genealogy, as her mother was chosen as a worshipper of the goddess too (and she also gave birth to an only daughter). Besides representing an important aspect of Igbo religion, the relationship between Efuru and Uhamiri underlines the relationship between women and their roles in society:

Her place as priestess of Uhamiri gives her great strength and power, yet it stops her from totally fulfilling her role as a woman in Igbo society. In the same way, the traditional culture gives women strength and power in passing on the traditions, yet these same traditions limit their roles. (Wilentz 1992: 16).

The goddess's call reveals itself through dreams in which the chosen woman enters the lake world, on whose bottom the goddess lives as "an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb" (Nwapa 1966: 46). In her dreams Efuru is very kindly welcomed by the woman (whose identity she is still unaware of), who entertains her in her 'kitchen' where she uses costly fish as firewood. When her father reveals to Efuru that her mother used to have the same dreams and that they are messages from the Woman of the Lake, her reaction is coherent with the distinctive features the writer has so far given her as an independent and modern woman:

She had heard, when she was a little girl, about women who were called worshippers of Uhamiri, the goddess of the blue lake. They were dressed in white on the day they sacrificed to their goddess. One particular woman came vividly to her. [...] a woman shouting at the top of her voice. [...] the woman had broken into a song, a very pathetic song, but to the children of Efuru's age, it all sounded fun. [...] woman was sitting on the bare floor with her legs crossed and was dressed in white from head to toe. She had rubbed white chalk on her
body. To Efuru now, the figure seemed pathetic though it amused her years back.
The woman sat in that position for days, singing and swaying from side to side; sometimes she would get up, take hold of one part of the thatched roof and shake it vigorously: She was truly possessed.
So, that night[...] she wondered as she remembered the woman: 'Am I going to behave like that woman? What exactly is going to happen to me? Will I rub white chalk, dress in white, sit on the floor and sing swaying from side to side? No, I am not going to behave like that.'
She was not going to be like that woman. (Nwapa 1966: 148)

It will be the dibia who reveals to her what a great honour the goddess is granting her and also initiates her in the expected rituals:

If you are to worship her, you must keep her taboos. Orie is her great day. You are not to fish on this day. I know you don't fish, but you should persuade others not to fish. You are not to eat yams on this day. You are not to sleep with your husband. You have to boil, roast or fry plantains on Orie days. [...] When you go to bed, you must be in white on Orie days. You can sacrifice a white fowl to Uhamiri on this day. When you feel particularly happy, or grateful, you should sacrifice a white sheep to her. Above all, you will keep yourself holy. When you do all these, then you will see for yourself what the woman of the lake would do for you[...]You are to buy an earthenware pot. Fill it with water from the lake, and put in one corner of your room. Cover it with a white piece of cloth. (Nwapa 1966: 154)

At the end of the novel, after her only daughter's death and after facing the vicissitudes of two unhappy marriages, Efuru chooses to live by herself, and dreams the goddess again. Her dream reveals her perplexity towards the tradition. The novel ends with a question the heroine asks herself and Nwapa asks her readers:

She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth, but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did women worship her? (Nwapa 1966: 221)

The question is really a rhetorical one, as Efuru has already chosen to live her life without men, and has renounced her motherhood for ever:
Women like Efuru who tend to be emotionally self-sufficient worship the Woman of the Lake because she represents what they have chosen to be. (Brown 1975: 500)

A goddess who demands chastity at least once a week from her worshippers, Uhamiri is a wife too. Her husband is Okita, master of the Great River:

The two were supposed to be husband and wife, but they governed different domains and nearly always quarrelled. Nobody knew the cause or nature of their constant quarrels. (Nwapa 1966: 201)

The human beings living by both the lake and the river have to step carefully during the family discussions of the two:

Don't call her name here. Don't you know that she is not on speaking-terms with Okita, the owner of the Great River? If you call her again to our aid, Okita will be angry with us and capsize our canoes. (Nwapa 1966: 199)

The goddess is strongly against prostitution ("[...] that's why prostitutes of our town never profit by it") (Nwapa 1970: 39) and helps prostitutes to repent and change their lives (Nwapa 1970: 41):

If any of the women ignored the Woman of the Lake she gave them two to three years in which to repent, that is, to come home and get married like any respectable woman. If after this period the person did not repent, something dreadful would happen to her. She would either become mad or contract a very bad disease of which she would die. (Nwapa 1970: 120)

This deity, who chooses women as devotees, is feared by men:

To the stream? God forbid, not tonight. We will not go, for the woman of the lake would take us. (Nwapa 1970: 10)

Any profanation is immediately punished as happens to Uberife's son who dives into the lake next to the goddess's altar, tries to pluck the goddess's palm fruits (which become coal when brought to the surface), and consequently drowns (Nwapa 1970: 124). The goddess is only kind with white foreigners: she does not let them catch any fish, but does not make them die. In Never Again (1975), where Nwapa describes the Nigerian civil war, Uhamiri is the only deity invoked; the victory over the enemies will be attributed to her, to underline both the power of the female goddess, and the fact that the Christian religion has not succeeded in supplanting the native faith in Igbo deities. A probable reference to
Uhamiri is to be found in *One is Enough*, where the main character, Amaka, is beautiful, rich, and a mother:

Those women who made great fortunes in their village when Amaka's mother was only a girl were childless. Wealth came first, and blocked the chances of having children. According to their belief, the two did not go together. You either had children or you had wealth. Her own daughter had disproved this belief. She now had two lovely sons and wealth. (Nwapa 1995a: 116)

Amaka would, then, be an ideal descendant of Efuru in a culturally different context, thirty years later. Much less moral than Efuru, according to Christian criteria (she becomes the lover of a catholic priest to carry out her own purposes), and to traditional customs (she leaves her husband when he imposes polygamy on her, starts a career of corrupted business, and finally divorces, keeping her children with her), Amaka asserts herself against the traditional religious values, even against the favourite one of Uhamiri, never explicitly quoted, but identifiable in her speech and behaviour.

We have also to underline the fact that as 'Mammywata' Uhamiri was endowed with European qualities while still retaining some of the attributes associated with local water deities. [...] According to Nwapa (1991), Mammywata worship evolved with the birth of the colonial representative's daughter of color. (Okonjo Ogunyemi 1996: 29-30)

Therefore, Uhamiri would be a combination of traditional patterns and new Western ones introduced by colonialists: for example, she perpetually combs her thick hair and constantly looks at herself in a mirror, like white women are supposed to do; she is portrayed as rich and idle, living in the best possible way, pampered by servants, childless, but nonetheless authoritative, just like white colonial women were perceived by Nigerians. She becomes, then, the symbol of what a Westernized Igbo woman might become. As this goddess appears so central in Nwapa's fiction, we could affirm that Uhamiri is "Nwapa's persona, her alter ego, her mother, her daughter" (Okonjo Ogunyemi 1996: 139).

The other female deity most frequently quoted by Nwapa (and also present in Achebe's novels) is *Ani*, 'Earth Goddess', also named as 'goddess of the land'. She is Chukwu's daughter and extremely powerful; she controls the living and the dead and the abundance of crops depends on her help.

As physical earth, Ani functions metaphorically as the womb which contains the living-dead ancestors during the period of gestation before they are reincarnated from the spirit world of the tomb into the physical and human world. (Ogbaa 1992: 30)
Every 'unnatural' birth, such as that one of a baby born with teeth (Nwapa 1966: 169), is considered an offence against the goddess:

The abnormal boy was the cause of the poor harvest last year. [...] The goddess of the land was angry with us and we must appease her. So before we start tilling the soil this planting season, we shall sacrifice to the goddess of the land. (Nwapa 1966: 170)

Giving birth to twins is considered an abomination towards the goddess, as only animals give birth to more than one creature at a time, and such an ignominy has to be purified by killing the babies. Committing suicide is an offence against the goddess too: people who commit suicide cannot be buried according to the ritual, nor can they be touched by the village people as they are considered impure:

He had polluted the goddess of the land so the goddess of the land would have to be propitiated. Amarajeme would not be mourned, he would be thrown away, as a dog is thrown away when it is dead. [...] he was going to be wrapped up in an old torn mat. His age-group would not mourn him. (Nwapa 1970: 146)

We find a reference to giving birth to twins in One is Enough when the cultural situation has greatly changed from the one described in Nwapa's first novels. In this novel the heroine gives birth to twins, is proud of them, and has no doubt about keeping them alive. A comment on the previous cruel practices is also expressed:

"[...] In the olden days, she would not have set eyes on the twins. They would have been killed and the gods and goddesses of the land appeased." "That was over seventy years ago." "No, ten years ago. Some people still throw away twins." (Nwapa 1995a: 114)

It is quite common to find the various religious figures quoted together in the characters' invocations, nearly always respecting the hierarchical order: "I am praying God and all our ancestors to give her a child." (Nwapa 1970: 112); "Have I not sacrificed to my chi and the ancestors?" (Nwapa 1966: 78); "When a woman is good, God, our ancestors and the Woman of the Lake all look at her stomach [...]" (Nwapa 1970: 43); "Our ancestors will punish you. Our Uhamiri will drown you in the lake." (Nwapa 1966: 216).

2 An identical situation is described for Okonkwo, the protagonist of Achebe's Things Fall Apart: "It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil and only strangers may touch it." In Achebe 1992: 178.
Some hints to traditional religion are to be found in *One is Enough*, through the voice of Amaka's mother. She quotes the formulas which were always present in *Efuru* and *Idu* and which are nearly non-existent in the other novels or collections of short stories: "God forbid, our land forbids that. Our gods and goddesses forbid it." (Nwapa 1995a: 26); "I begged our ancestors and they heard me." (Nwapa 1995a: 111). It is still the mother who takes Amaka to a *dibia* when it seems that she is not fertile. The scene is, however, significant as neither Amaka nor her mother (nor the mother-in-law when, later on in the novel, she visits the *dibia* for reasons connected with Amaka) manage to complete the negotiations. They put an end to the consultation, and the visit will appear useless, as if there were a process of disbelief on the part of the patients, which would impede the success of the *dibia*'s action, her possibility to communicate with both her patients and her gods. Moreover, in this episode we do not find quoted all those salutation forms, expressing respect, used in *Efuru* and *Idu* every time one talked to a *dibia*; in those two novels the *dibia* was always a man, and was contacted for the same reasons why the *dibia* of *One is Enough* is consulted, that is, the heroines' infertility. Finally, even the *dibia* seems to have undergone some changes, as is significantly stressed by the dialogue between the *dibia*'s husband and Amaka's mother-in-law:

"[...] I saw her the other Sunday receiving communion. Is she a *dibia*?"
"And what are you doing here if you are a Christian and a communicant? You are not supposed to come to my wife [...]". (Nwapa 1995a: 90)

In *Women are Different*, one of the four heroines expresses the ambiguous position of a person who would like to believe in the past rituals, but cannot do so because of the disbelief caused by her school education, based on the Christian faith; in such a situation the woman finds herself deprived of the support of both religions. For this reason, Rose cannot turn to a *dibia* for comfort, even if she feels like doing it: "But Dora one has to believe, one has to have faith before one can have positive results. My upbringing does not value that kind of approach." (Nwapa 1995b: 124).

Some references to the Christian religion can be found in *Efuru* and *Idu*, where the faith of the colonialists has a negative connotation, as it is seen as a corrupting presence which wipes traditional values out, substituting them with other values which are incomprehensible for the protagonists:

If your property was stolen, you simply went to one of the idols and prayed him to visit the thief. Before two or three days, you recovered your property. But these Church-goers have spoilt everything. They tell us our gods have no power, so our people continue to steal. (Nwapa 1966: 176)
Old and new religion often live side by side if a person who has studied is speaking:

"Immediately I returned, I told my mother and she sacrificed to our ancestors." "How is that, you go to Church?" "What about that? I shall give the pastor some money to thank God for it." "I see. I can never understand you Churchgoers [...]". (Nwapa 1966: 112)

In this passage the 'God' Gilbert refers to is a Christian God.
The missionaries' teaching is openly criticized in *Wives at War*:

Their teachers didn't teach them the facts of life. They left so many things unexplained. They did not tell them that life was too complicated, and that they had to be taught to succeed. They were taught to turn the other cheek. This was all well and good in the time of Jesus, not in their own times. Turning the other cheek was cowardly, it meant bringing about your own end. It meant you were soft. The world was tough. (Nwapa 1992: 52)

A similar concept is expressed in *Women are Different*:

I think we were oversheltered by the good missionaries. They were good in their own ways, but did not prepare us for the kind of life we would be called to live in Nigeria of the seventies. (Nwapa 1995b: 100).

When a convert is speaking in *Efuru* and *Idu*, Nwapa's language is transformed; her African English offers expressions clearly derived from the Bible, with its archaic forms and metaphors, an example of the strong influence of the missionaries:

God, receive all in Thy kingdom. Pagans, we Christians told you to repent and be saved. In a short time, Christ will descend and sort out the sheep from the goats. Oh, I have lived to see the Day. [...] To the Christians it was the coming of Christ. He was to come like a thief in the night, unheralded, so they had to be prepared. (Nwapa 1970: 82)

In the next novels, where all the characters are converts, we find references to the Old and New Testament inserted in the everyday talk of the characters, to testify that the education they have received has been well assimilated as far as the Holy Scriptures are concerned. We then find sentences such as:

What Christ said about demons in the New Testament was correct. When a man was out of balance, it meant that evil spirits had entered the man, and had played havoc with him. (Nwapa 1995 a: 20)
"As far as the boys and the girls were concerned they were, each pair, Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden." (Nwapa 1995b: 17); "[...] praying that God should help my prodigal daughter." (Nwapa 1995b: 122).

In the works written after *Efuru* and *Idu*, we no longer find the songs and the magical formulas which recurred so frequently, when Nwapa wanted to familiarize the readers with her people's culture. In that case her language became rich in Igbo words:

"Uhamiri, she has refused to bring it out
Utuosu, she has refused to bring it out
Ngananga, she has refused to bring it out
Akpu-nwa-ngworo, she won't bring it out
So you visit her,
Uhamiri
Utuosu
Nganaga
Akpu-nwa-ngworo. Visit her." (Nwapa 1970: 60)

This is a further example of how Nwapa transforms elements belonging to an oral tradition:

The writer is part of a long chain in reincarnating texts. She inherits the past, learns from it, then leaves her own distinctive stamp on the corpus, thus helping to establishing a tradition. (Okonjo Ogunyemi 1996: 43)

As religion is so deeply rooted in Igbo lives and activities, we might even apply a religious image to the Igbo writer's work and conclude by underlining how in many ways a foremother, Nwapa is a pathfinder or Chinedu (*Chi* who guides). [...] Just as a kind benefactor may be referred to as one's *Chi*, so a writer who precedes another can serve as her *Chi*, smoothing the path for those who follow. (Okonjo Ogunyemi 1996: 43)

Bibliography


3 In *One is Enough*, however, we find a thanksgiving prayer by Amaka's mother which follows the pattern of Igbo chants (Nwapa 1995a: 43).
Nwapa F., 1995a, One is Enough, Africa World Press Inc., Trenton.
Nwapa F., 1995b, Women are Different, Africa World Press Inc., Trenton.