

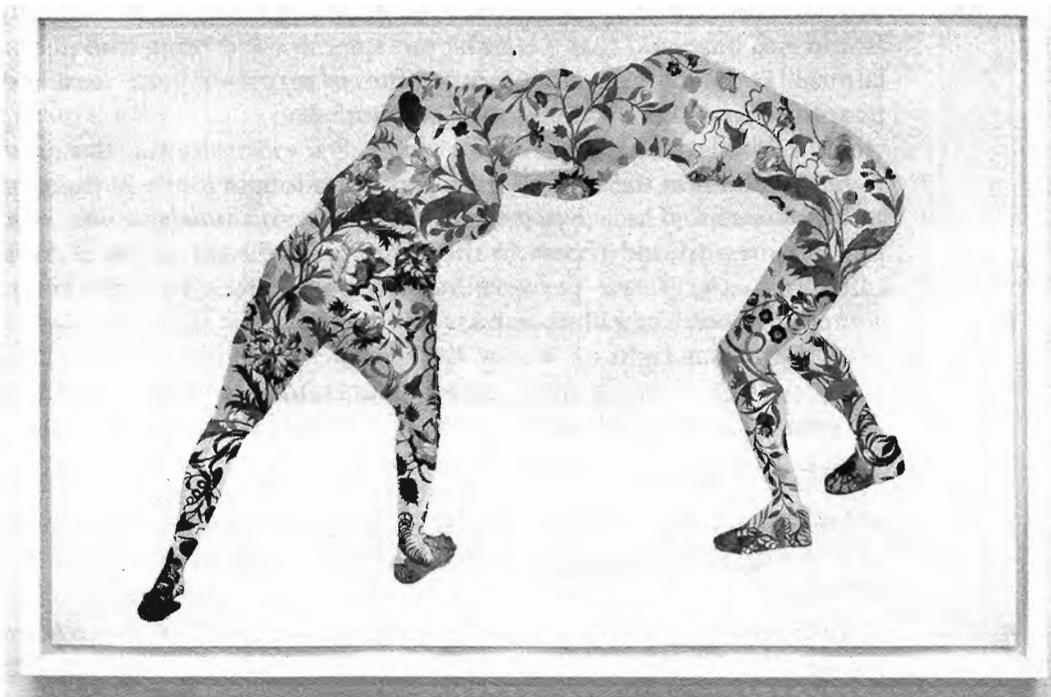
# Interview with Author Oriri E. Oriri on “Tradition” and “Modernity” in a Cross River Community

**Ivor Miller, PhD**

ORIRI EKOM ORIRI hails from Àkpàràbóng, an Èjághám-speaking rural community in the Íkóm Local Government Area of Nigeria’s Cross River State. His first novel, *The Hunt*, published by Calabar in 2010, describes in fascinating detail the indigenous institutions of his community: the Mgbè (Èkpè) “leopard” society for justice, the Mònínkìm coming of age rites for women, the age-grade system for community organization, and traditional marriage rites. The book then shows how westernization—the influence of Christianity, money and the police—transformed these traditional institutions. While Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* examines the tragic effect of western influence at the start of the British empire, *The Hunt* is set firmly in the late twentieth century. In keenly observed detail, Oriri’s story sets forth the transformation of a community in the face of an uncertain modernity.

**Ivor Miller:** *The Hunt* describes traditional life in a rural community in the upper Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria, near the Cameroon border with Mamfe. What inspired you to write *The Hunt*?

**Oriri Oriri:** *The Hunt* for me is a product of my growing up experience in a traditional setting in Àkpàràbóng, a farming community where yams are the major crop. The traditional name is Èkpàràbóng, meaning “ram,” because when under attack, our ancient people sent rams to destroy the aggressors’ yam barns, thus bringing famine upon [their enemies], in order to attack them when they were weak. In my youth our traditions were functional, and I saw so many cultural practices that inspired me, including the social organization into age grades for both males and females, and how the elders governed the community



to maintain law and order. But as I matured, I witnessed a lot of the culture being eroded. I realized that we were losing most of our tradition, so I was inspired to record vital aspects of the culture for posterity; this was the background to my writing *The Hunt*.

**Firelei Báez,  
Crewel, 2013.**  
Photo: STUDIO  
LHOQQ

**Ivor Miller:** What anecdotes do you have about the culture of Àkpàràbóng and its eventual destruction?

**Oriri Oriri:** In the 1950s and '60s Àkpàràbóng was a local community with very little external influence in terms of administration. We had government authorities at the local level, but any police officer who wanted to effect an arrest in Àkpàràbóng would first report at the palace of the *mínén-émàng* [the “overall chief”]; he would never come to Àkpàràbóng and move straight into anybody’s house to make an arrest; it was the chief who assisted the government functionaries to carry out their job by summoning the suspect to the palace. The chiefs had authority within the community to maintain law and order. *Mgbè*, in English the “leopard” society, was one of the instruments they used as an administrative organ. For instance, in the opening chapter of *The Hunt*, I describe a situation wherein somebody had committed an offense against the community, and when the chiefs tried to manage the situation the accused

was recalcitrant, so they brought the matter to Mgbè, and Mgbè brought its force to bear, and they were able to tame him and bring him under control. These things occurred quite often in my growing-up years, and people obeyed Mgbè rules for the benefit of all.

In those days, there were clear rules. For example, you dare not fight somebody in the bush or the farm. If you fought in the bush, both parties were fined heavily; whatever level of provocation, one was compelled to return and report to the community for the chiefs to look into the matter. It was perceived that if people fought in the bush, somebody could be killed or hurt very badly. If you fought, it didn't matter who was right or wrong, both parties were punished. Killing

**If you fought, it didn't matter who was right or wrong, both parties were punished.**

another person, especially a member of the community, was taboo. It was sacrilegious to spill the blood of another member of the community. This was seen as going against the ancestors, who had handed down the need for love and unity among the community.

If this happened, the culprit could in extreme cases be made to commit suicide. In this case, the community would gather, and a leading member of the culprit's own family would hand over the noose, and the culprit would hang him or herself from a tree. Thereafter there was a cleansing ceremony whereby the paramount ruler and his council of chiefs performed some rites and thereafter dragged a goat through the community with a rope around its neck. By the time the goat reached the other end of the community, it was dead. The goat had gathered all the problems of the community onto its body and therefore died from the defilement.

For instance, there were land disputes. If somebody went into your land and cultivated, you were not allowed to go and uproot what he planted; you were required to report this to the community, so that the community could resolve the matter. If you went there on your own, even though it was your land, you were punished. Those were some of the rules in place and people complied, and there was peace. People slept well. But as we grew up and there was urbanization, I helplessly watched these values being eroded. People saw that they could bypass the authority of the community chiefs; if an unfavorable decision was delivered by a chief against them, they could go to the police station and manipulate the situation through bribes. It got to a point where money became very powerful, so those with money could manipulate and twist the course of justice. Gradually the authority of the traditional rulers started waning, and as a result we are now continually having unresolved problems.

In those days, however wealthy you were, it was not possible for you to become a chief if you were not from the royal lineage. But now if you have money you can become a chief by “settling” a few influential persons within the community, after which some of the traditional rulers will promote your aspirations for a chieftaincy title, and suddenly you will be conferred with such a title. Things like that are common these days, whereas they did not happen in the past. I therefore felt compelled to record this transition for posterity, to show that we are coming from somewhere, and those who are coming after us should know that our values have not always been as they are now.

**Ivor Miller:** What were the first non-indigenous institutions to enter your community?

**Oriri Oriri:** In the late 1950s, when I became conscious of things happening around me, I saw the church growing side by side with the traditional institutions. The damage to our lifeways was not very severe, because the church at that point was struggling to find its feet. As the church grew, more and more people were gradually moving into it, and urbanization also set in. More of the young people went to school, came back with degrees and were working here and there. The effects of what some have called “civilization” brought in a crisis of identity and values that we are currently experiencing.

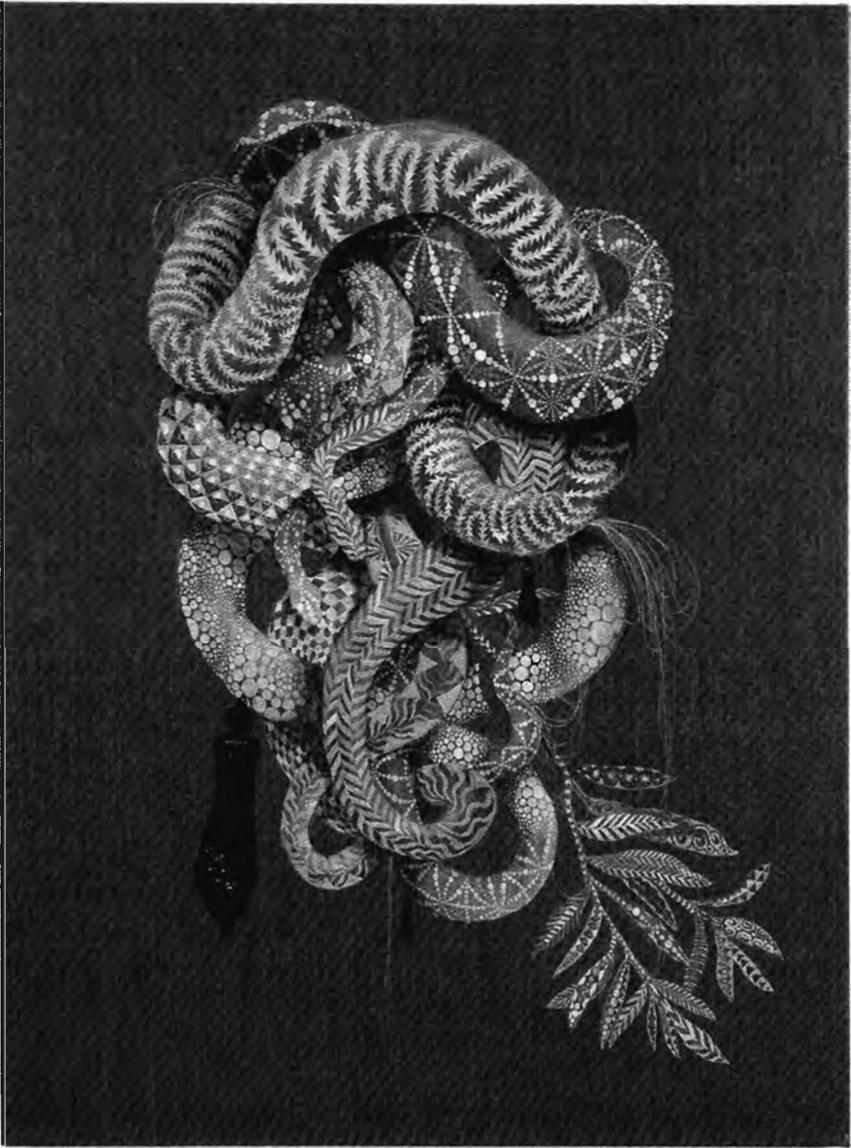
**Ivor Miller:** Are you from a royal lineage yourself?

**Oriri Oriri:** I am from a royal family, but I am careful about talking about this because I have no aspirations for royalty, that is, in becoming a chief. My father and grandfather were Mgbè title-holders, and they initiated me as an ordinary member. My elder brother is a title-holder, thus continuing the family lineage.

**Ivor Miller:** In your community there are the royal lineages and there are other people. Are they described as slaves?

**Oriri Oriri:** In my community we have royal lineages, and we have the ordinary citizens who are known as “free-born.” The eight traditional clans of the community are made up of eight royal families, each are descendants of the original community founders. The members of each are eligible to occupy the royal stool of the paramount ruler, and the eight clans control all the land in the community.

Today it is a bit difficult to distinguish the former “slave” class from the royalists, because those who were supposed to have been slaves now belong to these royal families, because generations ago, they were



**Firelei Báez,**  
***Becoming***  
***New***  
**(*A Tignon For***  
***Mami Wata*),**  
**2015.** Acrylic  
on canvas,  
121.9 x 86.4 cm.  
Photo: STUDIO  
LHOOQ

assimilated into them. While technically the former slave class belonged to the royal family, they could not receive titles of royalty or become chiefs. Even though a former slave was integrated within a family, they could never be crowned as a chief. There are three categories of indigenes: the chiefs, the “free-borns” and the slaves. The “free-borns” are from the royal family from birth, while the chiefs are the “free-borns” who take titles later in life. Males of the former slave families could become ordinary Mgbè members, but they could not become Mgbè title-holders or chiefs.

**Ivor Miller:** *The Hunt* describes how in the past, the Mgbè or Ékpè society was feared. What kinds of power did its leaders have?

**Oriri Oriri:** When I was growing up, two categories of persons were not allowed in public when the Mgbè rites were being conducted: women and children. And for purposes of clarity, any man who was not an initiate was regarded as a woman. This was why many elites struggled to become initiates, because adult male members of the community, even if they were big men somewhere in the urban areas, when they returned home, they were not allowed to move freely if the Mgbè rites were being carried out. Because of that, most of them struggled to be initiated, even if they didn't want to get too deep, they became associated just to have that liberty to move around freely. Mgbè was dreaded because once the Mgbè chiefs met and passed their decree, they had ways of physically enforcing it; they also had esoteric methods of enforcing their rules. If you were asked not to do a certain thing and you went ahead and did it, the chiefs would take steps to stop you and if you were recalcitrant, you could, in extreme cases, die mysteriously. People who were stubborn were brought under control. I have said that women were not supposed to come out when Mgbè was performing. But I remember a stubborn woman who came out during an Mgbè session. She was not a mad woman, but one could say she was unstable, so the chiefs ignored her, but it later became talk of the town. Within a week after she had observed Mgbè during their performance, she went to farm, and on her way back the wind started blowing; suddenly the branch of a great tree snapped off and tore her into two. I cannot say it was Mgbè that did it, but the fact that it happened within such a short time of her disobeying the Mgbè rule brought fear in the community. Things like that happened quite often and struck fear into the people, who invariably complied with the Mgbè rules.

**Ivor Miller:** *The Hunt* describes the erosion of Mgbè's social power. How did this happen?

**Oriri Oriri:** With urbanization and the activities of the church, it got to a point where people no longer feared Mgbè, to the extent that when Mgbè gave out their decree, some people defied, some even took Mgbè to court and won a few cases, thus eroding the powers of Mgbè. The height of the crisis came in the late 1990s when the youth rose up against the elders of my community, believing that some elders were using witchcraft to kill people mystically. In anger, the youths brought the elders and chiefs into the Mgbè hall, then they lit a fire within the hall and put pepper into it, locking the elders inside; you can imagine the old people sneezing, it was a very terrible thing. After that experience the situation degenerated to a level that the police were brought

in, and a young man was shot, so it became a problem for the whole community. After that the elders became very careful, because the kind of authority they used to have fled as a result of that crisis. The elders didn't want to be subjected to such humiliating treatment again, so most of them decided to withdraw their participation from public activities. They still gather for Mgbè rites, but they no longer have that passion to govern as they used to.

**Ivor Miller:** How are the youth organized in your community? How could they have such power to challenge the elders?

**Oriri Oriri:** As I reflected in *The Hunt*, villages in our region have age group systems; the youths have their own organizations and they have youth leaders. Even before this incident, the youths were being co-opted into the administration of the elders through these leaders. Each time they had a meeting to decide the issues of the community, the youths were brought in through their leaders, and it is through their leaders that they rose up against the elders.

**Ivor Miller:** What is the influence of the Church in this situation? Are the issues between Church and tradition a real conflict, or a misunderstanding by the incoming religion?

**Oriri Oriri:** The Mgbè leadership has no real problem with the church, or with their members going to church. Mgbè represents the community administration; it is not a religion! Meanwhile, the leadership of the church distance themselves from our culture, especially Mgbè and the age-grade system, because not being a part of this system they fear what they do not understand. The church thinks that Mgbè is "fetish" and that they use esoteric powers to wreak havoc in the society. The church wants people to subject themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ; accordingly, they teach their members to distance themselves from cultural activities. In my opinion, we are pouring out the baby with the bathwater, because we know Mgbè is a good judicial system. But those who know Mgbè from the inside know that there is no contradiction between Mgbè practice and belief in a supreme being. But because of the influence of pastors, the more community members go to church, the less people we have to maintain the issues of Mgbè and our culture.

**Ivor Miller:** Do people feel compelled to attend Church to avoid being accused of participating in tradition?

**Oriri Oriri:** If you are not a Christian or a churchgoer, and something goes wrong in your family, you are the first suspect. In our culture, a

spiritual explanation is identified for everything that goes on in the family. If somebody is sick, some powers are responsible for that sickness; if somebody is poor, it is perceived that negative powers are responsible for their lack of prosperity; if somebody dies, some powers are responsible for the death. Therefore, if you were seen as a Christian and the other person is not a Christian, and somebody dies in that family, chances are that the non-Christian is the first suspect. In order to play safe, you will go to church, so that everybody will see that you are a Christian and you don't have your hands in "fetish" things. The church is an escape route.

Ironically, this situation arose because the traditional doctors, also known as "witch-doctors" or "juju priests," were running out of clientele because people were going to church and no longer patronizing them. So they decided to "repent" and also go to church; and many

have become pastors, some emerging as founders of Pentecostal churches. In short, the witch-doctors have infiltrated Christendom!

**If somebody is poor, it is perceived that negative powers are responsible for their lack of prosperity; if somebody dies, some powers are responsible for the death.**

**Ivor Miller:** You have told us that community youths had humiliated the Mgbè leaders. How has this conflict affected the influence of the paramount ruler of your community, who is also an Mgbè leader?

**Oriri Oriri:** The *mìnén-émàng*, or paramount ruler, exercises his authority through Mgbè. The *inén-émàng* is royal head of the entire community, equivalent to the head of state; he rules the community with his lesser chiefs. Mgbè is one of *mìnén-émàng*'s agencies of administration, akin to the police force. There are other agencies that deal with security or defense, and with commerce, and so on. The *mìnèn-mgbè*, the chief of Mgbè, reports to the *mìnén-émàng* on Mgbè matters. Therefore, the current crisis has eroded the powers of both the *mìnén-émàng* and the entire Mgbè establishment.

In *The Hunt* I describe some of the arcane powers associated with our traditional institutions. When one became a paramount ruler, certain potent powers were attributed to that stool that anyone occupying the stool would exercise. Accordingly, people feared occupying the stool and escaped to join the Christian churches. There came a time when nobody was willing to occupy that stool, because it was believed that those on the stool were bound to render blood sacrifice to establish themselves on the stool. Not human sacrifice in the physical sense, but as I said earlier, in the belief system of the people, nothing happened



**Firelei  
Báez, *Trust  
Over History,  
Memory*  
2015.** Acrylic  
and ink on panel,  
118.1 x 80 cm.  
Photo: STUDIO  
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without some spiritual connotation. It was believed that for you to establish yourself on the stool there must be blood sacrifice. Therefore, once you became a paramount ruler, if anybody died in your family, others concluded that you had spiritually sacrificed that person to establish yourself on that stool. It got to a point that whoever was chosen

to mount that stool would escape and not return. Therefore, the institution had to be 'modernized', meaning that the paramount rulers are now usually Christians. These paramount rulers publicly use the principles of Christianity to administer to the people. For example, if there is a problem in the community, instead of reciting traditional incantations, the paramount ruler may call the pastor to pray for the community. Meanwhile, he will in private continue to recite incantations, pour libation to the ancestors and work fully with Mgbè in a traditional manner. The paraphernalia handed down through the generations that represented or embodied the powers of the stool were said to be discarded because they were feared. The exact nature of what transpired at Etunibalen, the royal cemetery, when the Mgbè chiefs exclusively went to discard the paraphernalia, had however remained a mystery as subsequent events did not disclose any change in the efficacy of the powers of the royal stool. The people have continued to view the "modern day" paramount ruler and his chiefs with awe and trepidation as mysterious deaths, incidents and accidents still occur within their families.

**Ivor Miller:** Do paramount rulers continue to pour libation to the ground as tradition dictates?

**Oriri Oriri:** Yes, the paramount rulers still pour libation, but the powers and spiritual authority of the traditional rulers have waned seriously. These days, the state government has recognized them, so the paramount ruler can bring in policemen to carry out what he wants to do in the community. They have government powers now, but they no longer enjoy most of the traditional powers they use to exercise, because the youths have become more daring and they can challenge the paramount rulers, as I have described.

**The Éjaghám children of today have a disconnect between where their parents are coming from and where they are going.**

**Ivor Miller:** Many youths don't understand the full dimensions of their community traditions, yet "modernity" is not functioning well. What kinds of identity do the children have today?

**Oriri Oriri:** We are in fact losing our identity as a people. The Éjaghám children of today have a disconnect between where their parents are coming from and where they are going. For example, most young people of today, even within the rural communities, can't speak their parents' language, because their parents believe it is fashionable for them

to speak English. Meanwhile, they don't even speak correct English; they speak Nigerian pidgin, so they end up neither speaking English nor their parents' language. This situation is emblematic.

As I have described, within the community, the powers of Mgbè—the instrument of governance—are seriously eroded. People are going to church, people are going to school, but not many of the young people are interested in the cultural heritage of their people. And the elders who are the repositories of the culture are dying, so the young people are growing up without knowing their culture, without knowing where they are coming from. That is a big problem.

As I speak, even my own children find it difficult to speak my variant of Éjaghám language, because most of them were born in Calabar and in the course of my work, they have been moving between Calabar and Abuja. I have made efforts to get them to speak Ekparabong dialect, without much success. While my wife and I have been battling with our careers, most of the maids we bring in to assist with the children do not understand our language as they are not from our community, so they speak English with the children. I am taking full responsibility for this. I am not happy about it so I continue to make efforts for them to understand a little. I am talking about myself who lives in Calabar; it's worse with those within the rural communities who are having the same problem. The culture is being eroded and unless we document some of these things, they are gone for good. After writing *The Hunt*, I received a great response from the whole of my Éjaghám area, because this is without a doubt the very first novel to project the culture of the people of our area in a literary form.

**Ivor Miller:** *The Hunt* was self-published in 2010, and was approved for use in all secondary schools in Cross River State. It is currently being taught at the University of Calabar and the Cross River State University of Technology in Calabar. To what do you attribute this positive response? Are people seeking their cultural roots? Is there an element of Éjaghám nationalism?

**Oriri Oriri:** Since publication, *The Hunt* has sold over fifty thousand copies without commercial distribution. Quite astonishing! Most of the sales are to school students, [for] whom it is a prescribed text. The response I think reflects a yearning for cultural renaissance. People of my generation who understand that we had something of great value, that our desire for what we perceive as modernity is not functioning well, and who want their children to know about their community's history and culture, are responding to the book as a resource. They

want their children to read it as a guide, so they know that we had our own way of life, that we weren't always copying outsiders.

There is indeed a feeling of Éjághám nationalism, in the sense that Éjághám-speaking communities divided by the Nigeria-Cameroon border in 1960 have largely lost contact with one and another. As a result, the Éjághám communities on both sides of the border have become minorities within a minority region. There is a longing for unity and communication within our communities. There is a longing for the wisdom of the traditions of our ancestors.

*The Hunt* has been well received, for example, regarding the traditional marriage ceremony I described in great detail. Today children want to do a traditional marriage and they say: "My pastor says only minerals can be used; no alcohol must be taken in the course of the traditional marriage." So they offer minerals (i.e., soft drinks), they drink the minerals and pray and they finish the traditional marriage. But they leave there without learning anything about the culture as it relates to marriage.

**Ivor Miller:** Why is alcohol important in a traditional marriage?

**Oriri Oriri:** The alcohol is not the focus, instead it is the steps supposed to be taken in the traditional rites that relate to marriage. In my community, marriage is a union between two extended families, as described in *The Hunt*. This is very different than the western marriage between two individuals. The first rite is called "knocking of door" (when the male's family announces their intentions to the female's family), then after this, there is payment of bride price or dowry. These are very colorful ceremonies. Then the climax is the Mònínkim dance ceremony that I described in *The Hunt*, when the bride-to-be enters the fattening house for some weeks or months, where circumcision rites normally took place. As I recount in *The Hunt*, circumcision of women is now seen as harmful to the reproductive health of women. Nevertheless, it was part of our culture. In the fattening room the bride-to-be is trained. There is a lot of education in the process of how to get married, how to manage your husband, how to relate in the community and so on. It is an educational system with several important steps. And

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one of the steps is the pouring of libation, usually with palm wine. So when somebody says he is going to use Fanta or minerals, it becomes a problem, because the palm wine is from a palm tree and there is a whole culture around it. Palm wine is used to pour libation, because it is a natural product that the ancestors recognize. So if a traditional marriage has no libation with palm wine, it is incomplete traditionally. When you have been traditionally married you are supposed to know what it takes to be married traditionally, so that you pass it on to the next generation. But if you are married and you do not have any idea of the knocking of door, the rites of dowry payment and so on, then the next generation will not have any idea. ●



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## CONTENTS

- 1 Bla(c)kness in Australia**  
*Guest editors Sujatha Fernandes and Jared Thomas present work that examines the histories, experiences, and cultures of Aboriginal people and people of African descent in Australia.*
- 2 Introduction**  
*Sujatha Fernandes and Jared Thomas*
- 5 Black Bodies for Political Profit: Sudanese and Somali Standpoints on Australia's Racialized Border Regime**  
*Omid Tofighian reveals Australia's racialized and brutal system of border control in the context of the country's colonial past.*
- 19 Betrayal. A Prison Under Siege**  
*Mohamed Adam fled his home in war-torn Sudan for Australia. He hoped for a better life. Instead, Australia has warehoused him in an offshore prison, along with hundreds of other refugees and asylum-seekers.*
- 25 My Mother Tongue · Poetry**  
**Untitled**  
**Home Far From Home**  
*by Hani Abdile*
- 31 Time, Torture ... and Tomorrow · Poetry**  
**Artist's Statement**  
*by Hass Hassaballa*
- 34 Olivares · Fiction**  
*by Tony Birch*
- 43 "Reggae Became the Main Transporter of our Struggle ... and our Love"**  
*Victoria Grieves tells the story of Willie Brim, an Aboriginal musician who uses reggae to share his people's culture, history, and beliefs with the world.*
- 58 Yulani Dhabal · Poetry**  
*by Jeanine Leane*
- 59 Bla(c)k Lives Matter in Australia**  
*Yadira Perez Hazel considers the ways in which her participation in the Black Lives Matter struggle has provided a continuity of experience while living in both the United States and Australia.*
- 68 Ships in the Night · Poetry**  
**triangulating**  
*by Alison Whittaker*
- 72 Australian Blackness, the African Diaspora and Afro/Indigenous Connections in the Global South**  
*Kaiya Aboagye interrogates conventional narratives of Australia's colonial intervention and explores the ways in which erasure and omission have long concealed a complex history of racism, struggle and resistance on the continent.*
- 86 Granny's Absolutes · Poetry**  
**Over Ten Frames, My Father Paints the Portrait of Cool**  
*by Quintin Collins*
- 88 My Double Dutch Girl · Fiction**  
*by Gila Berryman*
- 102 Things I Didn't Know I Loved · Poetry**  
*by Jalynn Harris*
- 104 Interview with Author Oriri E. Oriri on "Tradition" and "Modernity" in a Cross-River Community**  
*Nigerian author Oriri E. Oriri tells Ivor Miller about the indigenous culture in which he was raised and how it was radically impacted by Western influence.*
- 117 The Origin of Nightmares · Fiction**  
*by Adams Adeosun*

The height of the crisis came in the late 1990s when the youth rose up against the elders of my community, believing that some elders were using witchcraft to kill people mystically. In anger, the youths brought the elders and chiefs into the Mgbè hall, then they lit a fire within the hall and put pepper into it, locking the elders inside; you can imagine the old people sneezing, it was a very terrible thing.

Dr. Jamal wants recognition—recognition not for himself, but for the work done; recognition for the Ugandan Asian community and its vast contributions to Uganda; recognition of the diaspora; recognition of President Museveni, who welcomed the expelled Asians back, and who restored to them their property and allowed them to prosper.

Members of both of Australia's major political parties imprison and exploit refugees in order to leverage the racism of their electorates. A majority of the Australian population is in a state of panic over the phony threat refugees pose to the nation's sovereignty and "culture." Therefore, the more brutal the border policies and the harsher the detention conditions, the more support these policies and conditions accrue.



**INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS**

Issue 126/2018