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Ide Miri Arusi': *A Feminine River Divinity in Igbo Cosmology*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

“Ide miri arusi (juju) by which the people take oath” note written in a photo album by Northcote Thomas, photo taken c. 1910-11.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Understanding “Ide miri arusi (juju) by which the people take oath,” reads a note written in a photo album by British anthropologist Northcote Thomas, accompanying a photograph taken around 1910–11. This brief yet profound description highlights the way European observers of the time often misinterpreted and generalized African religious and cultural practices using the term “juju.” The photograph and its accompanying note serve as a window into both Igbo cosmology and colonial perceptions of indigenous spiritual traditions.

The term “juju,” frequently used by Europeans in the colonial era, was applied indiscriminately to refer to objects, shrines, or rituals associated with African spirituality. However, within the Igbo context, “Ide Miri” holds a much deeper and specific cultural significance. Ide Miri is a feminine river deity venerated in the Igbo-speaking regions, particularly in the southern part of what is now Anambra State, Nigeria.

The river and its deity bear the same name, reflecting the intrinsic connection between natural elements and spirituality in Igbo belief systems. Rivers are often considered sacred spaces in Igbo cosmology, serving as dwelling places of deities, sources of life, and avenues for communication with the divine. Ide Miri, as a river goddess, is revered not only for her life-sustaining waters but also as an arbiter of justice. It is common for oaths to be sworn in her name, often as a means of ensuring truthfulness and fairness in disputes or agreements.

This practice of taking oaths before sacred entities underscores the role of spirituality in regulating societal norms and upholding moral

conduct. Unlike the generalized “juju” concept imposed by colonial interpretations, Ide Miri’s role as a deity reflects a complex and organized religious system deeply rooted in Igbo culture. This particular note by Northcote Thomas, therefore, serves as an artifact of both cultural documentation and colonial misrepresentation, emphasizing the need for careful and respectful interpretation of indigenous practices.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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