

Adelakun, A, Folarin, G O & Oladosu, A O 2022, 'Omi-Ìyè: Exploring the Nuances of the Metaphor of Abundance in John's Gospel and Yorùbá Episteme', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 139-157

Omi-Ìyè: Exploring the Nuances of the Metaphor of Abundance in John's Gospel and Yorùbá Episteme

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Abstract

The article examines the intersection of thought between Johannine and African contexts concerning the metaphor of living water. The Johannine context shows the unique usage of the term in the New Testament while the African context reveals how Africans as second-level receivers of the term apply it to their contemporary situations. Misconceptions surrounding the understanding of "the living water" concept in the Fourth Gospel is indicated in the article as well as an alternative interpretation of it is provided in the context of Yorùbá's understanding of *omi-iyè* in western Nigeria.

Introduction

Scholars have attempted to trace the background of Johannine usage of "living water" (*omi-iyè* in Yorùbá) motif to the Old Testament. An example of such scholars is Stovell. After an insightful study of the imagery in the Hebrew Bible, Stovell (2013:471) concludes,

[...] with a particular focus on the language of “living water” ... [in] the Old Testament, four major patterns of usage have presented themselves. First, Genesis described the living waters of creation, which in turn informed the apocalyptic usages of living waters in visions of re-creation. Second, Numbers and Leviticus used the literal meaning of fresh, flowing water, often associated with purification. Third, Jeremiah and Psalms provided the depiction of God as the fountain of living waters, demonstrating the Israelite hope of God as sustainer of the physical and the spiritual well-being of his people. Finally, Ezekiel and Zechariah used the language of waters of life to describe their eschatological visions, associating living waters with the renewal of the cosmos and the re-establishment of the ultimate rule of God.

Commenting on the submission above, Porter and Pitts (2013:8) state that Stovell succeeded in tracing the evolution and transformation of the varied meanings of the “living water” metaphor in antiquity, and conclude that John understood living water figure largely in continuity with how the way the Hebrew Scriptures depict it, with hope in God’s coming reign.

Apart from the Old Testament context explored by Stovell, there are other scholars who have studied Johannine and African contexts of the figure (e.g., Folarin, Oladosu and Baba 2012:15-36). The Johannine context shows the unique usage of the term in the New Testament while the African context reveals how Africans as second-level receivers of the term apply it to their contemporary situations.

John 4 Passage in Three Languages

Greek transliteration of John 4:7-14

⁷Erchetai gunē ek tēs Samareias antlēσαι hudōr legei autē
ho Iēsous Dos moi pein ⁸ hoi gar mathētai autou
apelēluthēisan eis tēn polin hina trophas agorasōsin ⁹Legei
oun autō hē gunē hē Samaritis Pōs su loudaios ōn par’
emou pein aiteis gunaikos Samaritidos ousēs ou gar

sunchrōntai loudaioi. Samaritais ¹⁰Apekrihē lēsous kai eipen autē, Ei ēdeis tēn dōrean tou Theou kai tis estin ho legōn soi, Dos moi pein, su an ētēsas auton kai edōken an soi hudōr zōn ¹¹Legei autō hē gunē Kurie oute antlēma echeis kai to phrear estin bathu; pothen oun echeis to hudōr to zōn ... ¹³Apekrihē lēsous kai eipen autē, Pas ho pinōn ek tou hudatos toutou dipsēsei palin ¹⁴hos d' an piē ek tou hudatos hou egō dōsō autō ou mē dipsēsei eis ton aiōna alla to hudōr ho dōsō autō genēsetai en autō pēgē hudatos hallomenou eis zōēn aiōnion (SBLGNT)

English translation of John 4:7-14

⁷ A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." ⁸ For His disciples had gone away to the city to buy food. ⁹ So the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, though You are a Jew, are asking me for a drink, though I am a Samaritan woman?" For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. ¹⁰ Jesus replied to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." ¹¹ She said to Him, "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep; where then do You get *this* living water?" ¹² You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well and drank of it himself, and his sons and his cattle?" ¹³ Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again; ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never be thirsty; but the water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life" (NASB).

Yorùbá Translation of John 4:7-14

⁷ Obìnrin kan, ará Samaria sì wá láti fà omi: Jesu wí fún un pé še iwọ yóò fún mi ni omi mu. ⁸ Nítorí àwọn ọmọ-ẹyìn rẹ ti lọ sí ilú láti lọ ra ọúnjẹ. ⁹ Obìnrin ará Samaria náà sọ fún un pé, "Júù ni iwọ, obìnrin ará Samaria ni èmi. Èétírí tí iwọ n

bèèrè ohun mímu lówó mi?” (Nítórí tí àwọ̀n Júù kì í bá àwọ̀n ará Samaria ẹ̀ pọ̀.)¹⁰ Jesu dáhùn, ó sì wí fún un pé, “Íbá ẹ̀ pé iwọ̀ mọ̀ ẹ̀bùn Olórun, àti ẹ̀ni tí ó wí fún ọ̀ pé, Fún mi ni omi mu, iwọ̀ íbá sì tí bèèrè lówó rẹ̀, òun íbá tí fi omi iyè fún ọ̀.”¹¹ Obìnrin náà wí fún un pé, “Alàgbà, iwọ̀ kò ní igbá-ìfami tí iwọ̀ ó fi fà omi, bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni kànga náà jì: Níbo ni iwọ̀ ó tí rí omi iyè náà? ...”¹³ Jesu dáhùn, ó sì wí fún un pé, “Ènikẹ̀ni tí ó bá mu nínú omi yìí, òngbẹ̀ yóò sì tún gbẹ̀ ẹ̀: ¹⁴ Şùgbọ̀n ẹ̀nikẹ̀ni tí ó bá mu nínú omi tí ẹ̀mi ó fi fún un, òngbẹ̀ kì yóò gbẹ̀ ẹ̀ mọ̀ láá; şùgbọ̀n omi tí ẹ̀mi ó fi fún un yóò di kànga omi nínú rẹ̀, tí yóò máa sun sí iyè àìnípẹ̀kun.” (<https://www.bible.com/bible/911/JHN.4.YCB>).

Although two main Johannine passages are discussed in this work, more space is, however, devoted to the John 4 passage.¹

Theological Study of *Omi-iyè* Metaphor in John

References to “living water” (*omi-iyè*) are in John 4:10 and 7:39.² In John 4:10, Jesus addressed the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. After asking her to give him water to drink, Jesus guided the woman’s thought from natural to spiritual water. It is observable that in the text, Jesus never called himself the living water to the woman. He only said that he *would have given* (*edōken*) her living water. For thorough analysis, the John 4 pericope can be divided into “narration (Jn 4:1-26), exposition (Jn 4:31-38) and demonstration (Jn 4:28-30, 39-40)” (Carson 1991:214). The advantage of this outline is that it holds the

¹ The John 4 passage is rendered above in three languages to ease comparative study. The Greek text is transliterated since the work is theological and many of the targeted readers of this article may not be proficient in Greek. Again, whenever Greek words are cited in the article, transliterated forms are used. These reasons lead the current writers to present the transliterated form of the Greek passage. Likewise, the passage is rendered in English language to help the readers of the article who are deficient in Greek language to interact intelligently between the text and the article. Finally, the Bible passage is rendered in Yorùbá language to point out the place from where the term *Omi-iyè* used in the discussion below is found.

² Folarin, Oladosu and Baba (2012: 22-28) provide a more in-depth and technical exegesis of Johannine “living water” passages for whoever is interested in it.

pericope firmly together. The interpretation that follows below focuses on John 4:1-15 and is captioned “The gift of the living water.”

John 4 is renowned for its “living water” saying expressed in the story of a Samaritan woman. Briefly restated, with the growing popularity of Jesus’ ministry over John’s, and the resultant hatred from “the Pharisees,” Jesus left Judea passing through Samaria on his way to Galilee. It was here in Sychar, a city of Samaria, that he came across a woman at the well with whom he engaged in discussing the “living water” issue. The following observations ensue from the story: the woman was a Samaritan while Jesus was a Jew; the woman wanted the water to quench temporal thirst but Jesus talked to her of the water that has eternal value; the woman misunderstood the water that Jesus talked to her about and Jesus had to correct her; and finally, Jesus revealed himself to the woman unambiguously with the implied conclusion that she experienced the salvation brought by the Messiah (cf. Jn 4:39).

The first three verses of John 4 give the reason why Jesus left Judea for Galilee: his increasing popularity and the hostility that arose from the Pharisees against him as a result of that. John 4:4 states, “He had to go through Samaria.” The compulsion for Jesus to pass through Samaria in John 4:4 was not because it was the shortest route from Judea to Galilee but for the divine engagement awaiting him in Shechem (Brown 1975:169; cf. Carson 1991:214).

Two dialogues are found in John 4:7-15 and the first is in John 4:7-10 with a parenthetical comment that his disciples went to the city to buy food in verse 8. The value of water to life cannot be overestimated. This woman and her neighbors needed it to survive. Of course, it was odd for her to go to the well alone, and at a strange time. Most women in that area used to come out to draw water in group and either early in the morning or when the sun had gone down. But her timing perfectly fits the plot.

Jesus’ partner to the discussion was the “Samaritan woman” (Jn 4:7). The word, “Samaritan(s),” is only used in verses 7, 9, 39, and 40. References in verses 39 and 40 are outside this work. The translation as “Samaritan” in verses 5 and 7 is explanatory but inadequate. The contention here is that not all the inhabitants of Samaria in Jesus’ time were of mixed blood especially if Gaster is right that remnant native Israelites and foreign colonists co-existed in

Samaria, but for “tendentious reasons ... the Jewish version ignores the former; the Samaritan version, the latter” (Gaster 1962:192).

The phrase, “Jews have no association with Samaritans,” in John 4:9 implies a lot. Brindle points out that the problem between the two groups began with the division of the kingdom of Israel, and continued through successive incidents which promoted antagonism, including the importation of foreign colonists into Samaria by Assyria, the rejection of the new Samaritan community by the Jews, the building of a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim, the political and religious opportunism of the Samaritans, and the destruction of both the Samaritan temple and their capital of Shechem by John Hyrcanus during the second century BCE (Brindle 1984:48; Köstenberger 2007:438).

The Samaritans’ acceptance of only the Pentateuch as Scripture further divided the two groups of people. Of course, the Samaritans claimed to be descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh, and that their priesthood was through the tribe of Levi. “They prefer to call themselves ‘Shamerim’ - in Hebrew, guardians - for they contend that they have guarded the original Law of Moses, keeping it pure and unadulterated” (Mann 1977:77). They rejected that the Assyrian deportation polluted all of them and that only an insignificant number of their people were deported. It has even been argued that after the deportation, the Samaritans who intermarried and those that did not kept on living side by side (Gaster 1962:191).

The woman that featured in John 4:1-26 was a Samaritan. Samaritans were alleged to be products of mixed marriages between Jews and colonists deported to Samaria by Assyrians. When deported, the foreigners supposedly brought their various gods to Samaria through which they polluted the land by worshipping their gods in the sacred land (Cf. 2 Kings 17:29) and polluted the blood of the Jews they intermarried with in Samaria. This probably explains the initial hostility of the woman at the well to Jesus (Jn 4:8), so the compulsion for Jesus to pass through Samaria was to attend to a divine assignment (Jn 4:4).

Stories of three Samaritans come readily to mind in the Gospels: The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37); the Samaritan Leper (Lk 17:11-17); and the Samaritan Woman at the well (Jn 4:1-42). The first is simply a parable of good neighborliness, the second a receiver of and testifier to the miracle of healing

and the third, a recipient of the promise of “the living water.” The first two are male characters and are found in Luke, the last is a female and is only found in the Gospel of John (Ponessa and Manhardt 2005:39). Common to the three characters is anonymity which suggests that the interest of the stories is not in the persons but the teachings conveyed.

The encounter at the well with Jesus calls for particular attention. Hestenes (1990:4) notes the three liabilities against her to be membership of a minority race, guilt of immorality, and membership of an inferior gender. The cultural relationship between the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus’ time is described as “not ... having association (*ou ... sunchrōntai*) in John 4:9. *Sunchrōntai* is third person plural, present of *sunchraomai*. *Sunchrōntai* means to have social intercourse with, have dealings with, or associate on friendly terms with someone (Arndt and Gingrich 1957:783). The *ou* before it is negative particle, and when it combines with *sunchraomai* as does here, means that there is no cordial relationship. This is the sense of the NIV rendering, “For Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (Jn 4:9).

By asking the woman for “water ... to drink” Jesus broke certain social norms. Some of the customs of his day that he broke were that as a Jew he discussed with a Samaritan and that as a gentleman he discussed with a woman of questionable character. Again, contrary to the practice of the Jews of Southern Israel, Jesus asked for favor from a Samaritan, and he strangely requested to share water utensil with a Samaritan who was a supposed enemy. Edwin Blum (1983:285) comments on this thus, “A Jewish Rabbi would rather go thirsty than violate these proprieties.” Jesus’ actions were provocative and they reveal how far he went to incorporate the oppressed, the forgotten, and the socially prejudiced into God’s program. The other two positive stories of Samaritans in Luke 10: 25-37; and 17:11-17 could also be interpreted in this light.

This first round of dialogue centers on Jesus’ request for “water to drink” (Jn 4:7). Certainly, Jesus did not need to drink the water for throughout the narrative, he never drank it. Then the Samaritan woman repeated the request out of curiosity (Jn 4:9). John 4:10 links the first (Jn 4:7-10) on the temporal water with the second dialogue on the “living water” (Jn 4:11-26). Some scholars point out that the purpose of the first round of dialogue was to attract

the woman's attention to listen to the discussion that followed: the linking of the drinking water to the promise given to the woman.

The second dialogue in John 4:11-26 focuses on living water. This extends to verse 15. This is a metaphor and it is particularly significant because it only appears in the Fourth Gospel. Joubert (2007:87) observes that metaphor "works through a system of associated implications known from the secondary subject". It is therefore the responsibility of the reader or hearer of a metaphoric statement to select the characteristics of the secondary subject of the metaphor to apply to the primary subject of the metaphor.

The term, "living water," appears in verse 10 without article, and in verse 11 with article ("the living water"). In both verses the Greek phrase, *hudor zōē* (living water) is in accusative singular and the two expressions with or without article basically mean the same thing. This is similar to what the symbol of the "flowing water" that was in the Old Testament, a sign of God's special blessing for a pilgrim people (Is 41:18), a renewal of inner strength (Is 23:2-3), or an eschatological blessing (Zech 14:8-9). Vanhoozer (2002:1,6) is of the view that since the "living water" in Proverbs 13:14 is used for Torah in rabbinic Judaism, then in John 4, it represents the revelation or truth which Jesus gives, and that the Samaritan woman in John 4 received it and found life.

While Tenney (1961:481) suggests that the "living water" symbol in John 4 refers to Jesus, he may not be right because in John 4:10, Jesus speaks of "giving" and not "being" the living water. Joubert (2007:94), on the other hand, agrees that the living water figure in John represents the Holy Spirit. Of course, one cannot easily arrive at that conclusion from John 4 without the help of John 7. By this imagery, Jesus is presented in John as, "the true water-giving rock" (Bray 1996:68; cf. Ex 17:1-7; 1 Cor 10:4) to believers.

John 14:15-31 does not mention "living water" but the text shows that life-giving through teaching/counselling is a major work of the Holy Spirit after the Christ event. If one accedes that the phrase, "living water" in John 4 and 7 contains the same idea as "life giving water" or "water of life" especially in the light of Revelations 2:6 (cf. Keener 1993:272), then the role of the Holy Spirit in John 14 as life enhancing in relation to spiritual growth would be seen as

primary while other nuisances of the figure would be supplementary but important.

It has long been recognised by scholars that the Fourth Gospel contains tensions. One such is eschatological tension, between what has come and what is yet to come. For example, Turner, in working out the implication of this tension found in Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan's woman in John 4:23, on the hour "is coming," and the hour "now is," rejects whatever interpretation restricts Jesus' promise of the living water to the future. Turner's view is that since the promise appeared in the context of realised eschatology, the woman tasted the living water at the time, and one may add that she might not have had the filling of the water till after the resurrection (Turner 1977:10, 31).

Metaphors are supposed to aid understanding, but sometimes it does not illuminate understanding. The story of the Samaritan woman illustrates this problem (cf. Jn 4:11-12). The woman's initial misunderstanding of the metaphor could be excused because she a Samaritan who only held to the Pentateuch as Scripture (cf. Westcott 1908:149). Carson argues, interestingly, that the use of "understanding/misunderstanding" motif is a stylistic device in John (Carson 1982:90). More scholars now agree that John used misunderstanding/understanding literary device (Jn 4:10) to make implicit theological statements in a provocative manner. Phaniel (2008:27) is incisive,

John develops the use of misunderstanding, which he employs in some sentences. Misunderstanding occurs when a double sense or double meaning is derived. In [John] 2:19, Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." The audience misunderstands Jesus as referring to the Herodian Temple, when he is actually speaking of his body. "You must be born again" (Jn 3:3, 4) is misunderstood by Nicodemus to refer to a literal re-entrance into and re-emergence from his mother's womb. Jesus is speaking of the activity of the Spirit and the passivity of the sinner. In the encounter with the woman at the well of Samaria (Jn. 4:10, 11), Jesus says, "If you knew who it is who asks you, you would have asked and he would

have given you living water.” The adulterous woman replies, “But you have nothing with which to draw.”

We find allusion used whenever a character misunderstands the meaning of Jesus’ words, leading Jesus to communicate fuller and deeper truths about himself. Upon noting that it is a literary device, one must also recognise that it represents a historical reality. The most frequent sequence is an ambiguous statement by Jesus, a misunderstanding by the hearer, then clarification by either Jesus or the narrator. Jesus’ discourses on living water (Jn 4:10), food (Jn 4:32) and bread (Jn 6:33) furnish further excellent examples of these misunderstandings.

There are at least three effects of the misunderstanding/understanding motif upon the readers of John’s Gospel. First, it enlarges the gap between “insiders” and “outsiders.” The narrator makes the reader feel superior to the obviously less intelligent characters in the story. The misunderstandings cast judgmental shadows on those who ignorantly rejected Jesus, and these are the “outsiders.” This, in effect, nudges the reader into the privileged circle of those who understand the implications of Jesus’ words, the “insiders.” Second, this device allows John to clarify and expand theological truth. The final effect is that it teaches one how to read the Gospel by encouraging readers to recognise the two levels of language, and by warning that failure to understand identifies one with those foolish characters who did not rightly interpret Jesus’ words.

The background of Jesus’ reference to *omi iyè* (Gk: *hudōr zōntos*; Eng: “living water”) in John 7:38 was the Jews’ Feast of Tabernacles. For seven days, a Priest drew water from the Pool of Siloam and brought it in procession to the Temple with the joyful sounds of trumpets. The water was then poured into a bowl beside the altar. It was probably on the eighth day that Jesus unfolded the significance of the symbolism of the water libation. According to Morris and Marcus, Jesus used the water libation at the Feast to symbolise the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 7:39) which is to be received by faith in Jesus (Jn 7:38; cf. Jn 4:10; 17:37; Morris 1971:421; Marcus 1998:328-329). This

bestowal of the Holy Spirit was dependent on the resurrection of Jesus that was still future at the time Jesus met the Samaritan woman.

The utterance of Jesus, “If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink, whoever believes in me just as the Scripture said, out of his belly will flow rivers of living water” in John 7:37b-38 is perplexing to exegetes. Balfour (1995:369-379), among other New Testament scholars, identifies the problem areas in the passage as the grammar, the quotation source, and the application of the text (cf. Hodges 1979:239-249). The grammatical problem centers on the punctuation of the verses. This is allegedly significant to determining the referent of “his” in the phrase “out of *his* belly.” United Bible Society Greek Bible places a period after “let him drink” and a comma after “in me” to read, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes in me, just as the Scripture says, from within him will flow rivers of living water.” In this traditional or Eastern interpretation, *autou* refers to the believer from whom the living water flows out. It is a common Semitic Greek and is common in John (Burge 1987:88). Another is to place a comma after “to me” and a period after “in me” to read, “If anyone thirsts let him come to me and let him drink who believes in me. Just as the Scripture said, rivers of living water will flow from his belly.” The suggestion that this second punctuation gives rise a type of Hebraic parallelism (Balfour 1995: 369) has been rejected by Zane Hodges (1979:240) on the ground that the parallelism is not so exact. Gary Burge (1987:90) however appears more convincing “that Semitic parallelism does not require verbal exactitude but thematic precision.” The implications of the different readings resulting from the placements of the punctuations will be examined later.

The second problem is the source of the quotation introduced with the phrase, “just as the Scripture said.” Many scholarly discussions have led to the following opinions: that John 7:38 is not a direct quote from any particular Old Testament text (Constable n.d., online); that the ideas in the verse are paralleled in various Old Testament texts; and that Zechariah 14:8 is significant to the discussion (Balfour 1995:271-273). Some of the Old Testament references suggested as the sources for the quotation in 7:38 are Exodus 17:5–6; Numbers 20:7–11; Psalm 78:15–16; Proverbs 5:15; 18:4; Isaiah 12:3; 58:11; Zechariah 13:1; and Ezekiel 47:1-11 (Hodge 1979:243-245). While one may not agree with all the suggestions it is fair to conclude that for John, “the Scripture”

he refers to is a conflation of a whole range of texts and passages or could even be John's personal comment on Old Testament texts.

The third problem is whether the belly from where the rivers of the living water flow is that of Jesus or the Christian believer. The traditional punctuation of John 7:38 allows only for the latter meaning while the Western punctuation allows only for the former meaning. Building extensively on Isaiah 12:3, Marcus (1998:328-330) argues that the source of the rivers of the living water in this text is the belly of Jesus. This is the Christological interpretation. To Constable, the Christian believer is the source of the living water that flows out in the text (Constable n.d., online). Balfour (1995:374) exploits the concept of the presence of "double entendre" in John to conclude that neither of the two ideas is mutually exclusive to this text. Theology sometimes plays a vital role in resolving this issue. If the "rivers of the living water figure" in John 7:38 refers to the Holy Spirit, then nowhere else in John will the Spirit be said to be flowing from the believer to others. Rather, Jesus is the source of bestowing the Spirit to others (Jn 7:37b). If the radical but well-argued view of Gundry (2007:127-128) is correct that the living water flowing out from the belly in John 7:38 is urine then the believer is the source (cf. Ezek 7:17; Is 36:12). Hodges (1979:242-243) proffers two supports for the view that the source of the rivers in John 7:38 is the believer's belly: the traditional reading does not make the believer the source of the living water; it is improbable that Jesus will refer to himself in John 7:37b in the first person, and in John 7:38 in the third. The position of the present study is that Jesus is the bestowal of the living water, the Holy Spirit on the believer (Jn 7:37b), and that the gushing out of water from the belly (urine) of the believer is simply a figure of superabundant life for the believers themselves and not for others (Gundry 2007:128).

This "living water," according to John 7:39, is the Holy Spirit which is received by faith in Jesus (Jn 7:38). The importance of "faith" is brought out in the phrase: "He who believes in him" (Jn 7:37 cf. 4:10). This experience of endowing believers with the Holy Spirit is dependent on the resurrection of Jesus.

Significance of the Intercultural Interpretation for Yorùbá Community Theology

Building on the commonality of the figure of “Living water” to both the initial recipients of the Gospel of John (Jn 4 and 7) and the Yorùbá community of Nigeria, one finds the figure in the two contexts enriching each other on the importance of the Holy Spirit to the Yorùbá community of faith. Then challenges based on the interpretation are suggested.

Generally, Yorùbá Traditional Religion holds in common with some other religions worldwide that either water possesses the power in itself or only mediates divine power to do the supernatural. For Yorùbá in particular, *iyè* (“living”) connotes dynamism or power. While to some non-Yorùbá, “living water” (*Omi-iyè*) refers to “flowing water,” to the Yorùbá, *omi-iyè* refers to “life giving water” or “the water that improves the quality life.” From this comes the belief that certain types of water have powered to heal, make fruitful, prosper, and protect from the evil one (Folarin, Oladosu and Baba 2012:15-36). For example, the water from Osun River in Nigeria is regarded by its worshippers as divinely empowered. In fact, the motto on the vehicle plate number of Osun State is, “The State of the Living Spring” (or “The State of *Omi-iyè*”). It is believed (rightly or wrongly) that the water of River Osun can make the barren fruitful and can heal the sick. The use of water for healing in Africa is neither limited to Nigeria nor to African Traditional Religion (ATR). Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), Adewale (1986), and Folarin (1995) among others, have demonstrated that indigenous churches in Africa also use *omi-iyè* for healing.

At this point, the observations of Ogungbile and Olupona on water symbolism among the Yorùbá are significant to the current research. While Ogungbile interprets the power attributed to River Osun as not actual but symbolic (Ogungbile 1997:21-38), it is Olupona who clearly re-interprets the power attributed to the water of *Okun* (Ocean) and *Osa* (Lagoon) metaphorically: The power of Ocean symbolises imperialism and mercantilism, and that of the Lagoon is symbolic of fertility (Olupona 2006:276). The people of the south-western part of Nigeria are of the view that symbolic use of *omi-iyè* points to things beyond themselves (Folarin, Oladosu and Baba 2012:19). In that sense, the request in John 4 and the invitation in John 7 are significant to the African Christianity if the use of *omi-iyè* is taken as symbolic.

The use of *omi-iyè* for healing in *Aládùrà* churches began with Sophia Odúnlámì who claimed that God told her to administer sanctified rain water for healing in the midst of an epidemic. Observers affirmed the effectiveness of her healing ministry. Years later, Joseph Babalolá made a similar claim by blessing water in rivers and containers which he allegedly administered effectively for healing on various occasions. These became *omi-iyè* (*omi tí ó ún fún ni ni iyè*: the water that gives one life [where there is deadness]) (Folarin 2017:19). But unlike in Traditional Religion, Indigenous Christian churches hold that the power to heal is only bestowed on the water by invoking Christ on it. That is the reason the water is also called, “blessed water.” By this, they affirm that the water by itself is impotent to do the miraculous. It only becomes *omi-iyè* (Life-giving water) as it becomes a carrier of divine presence. Adherents of indigenous churches do drink the *Omi-iyè*, bath with it, and spray their homes and shops with it to wave off sicknesses, diseases, spiritual attacks, and other forms of misfortune. They hold further that *omi-iyè* mediates other forms of prosperity. The above implies that *omi-iyè* works magically which would be at variance with what *omi-iyè* in the relevant texts in John mean.

Omi-iyè thus became characteristic of *Aládùrà* Christianity. When water in river, well, bucket or, bottle is blessed, members of *Aládùrà* churches claim that such becomes *omi-iyè* (“water of life”). *Omi-iyè* is used in the Christ Apostolic Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church and the Celestial Church of Christ. It is a popular belief among members of African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria that *omi-iyè* (“water of life”) is a conveyor of divine power/presence, and not a metaphor of the divinity (Folarin, Oladosu and Baba 2012:19-20).

Unlike in the “bread of life” (Jn 6:27) and the “light of the world” (Jn 8:12) sayings, Jesus did not call himself the given water but the giver of the water of life (Jn 4:10; cf. 7:37-39). The concept of the “living water” among the Yorùbá and the African Indigenous Churches in particular is both creative and aggressive: water bears the divine power to destroy the wicked and to redeem bad situations. This role of the Holy Spirit in healing and prosperity, for the African Indigenous Churches members, of course, does not replace its role in the application of the blessing salvation from sin. It presupposes it.

This may be what Jesus meant by the promise of abundant life. Particular context determines the use of “abundance” in the New Testament. The Greek

phrase, *zōēn echōsin kai perisson echōsin* translates, “Having life and having (it) abundantly” (Jn 10:10; cf. Arndt and Gingrich 1957:657). To the Yorùbá, as to other Africans, abundant life is holistic: a healthy life both spiritually and materially. To them the “water of life” is not only the bestowal of eternal life. It also involves the bestowal of other blessings of life.

Many exegetes agree with the writer of John 7:39 that the water promised by Jesus is the Holy Spirit. The main contention is this: In John 4 and 7, is water a symbol or a carrier of the power of God? We subscribe that living water in John symbolises the Holy Spirit. But as African Christians, we do not doubt that blessed water could be a bearer of the power of God. The one fact that is indisputable is that Jesus, being the giver of the living water, is the giver of the Holy Spirit and the power inherent in the Spirit. This power quickens the person that receives it. As sovereign Lord, Christ can dispense the Spirit directly or through the agency of water. “The living water” metaphor is therefore significant in John only as it relates the Holy Spirit with Jesus and the believer.

Contributions to knowledge

This article advanced knowledge on the misconceptions surrounding the understanding of “the living water” concept in the Fourth Gospel and provided an alternative interpretation to it in the context of Yorùbá’s understanding of *omi-ìyè* in western Nigeria. It also shed light on the way the Indigenous Religious’ understanding of “water of life” enhances the appreciation of the role of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life.

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