

Mami Wata

Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas

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**“EEH, IF YOU SEE MAMI WATA, NEVER YOU RUN AWAY...”
(SIR VICTOR UWAIFO, GUITAR BOY, 1967)**

Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas” explores the visual cultures and histories of African and African Atlantic water deities and reveals the power and potency of images and ideas to shape the lives of people, communities, and societies. The exhibition has several sections: The first introduces Mami Wata, her personality, attributes, and visual culture. The next offers a broad historical overview of the sources and currents that constitute her visual history. This is followed by a series of case studies that demonstrate specific cultural, historical and artistic forces that have shaped Mami Wata and water spirit imagery in different places on the African continent, while the next part treats a similar theme for some of Mami Wata’s spirit sisters in the African Atlantic world. The final section considers Mami Wata as the muse that has inspired contemporary artists from Africa, the Caribbean and the United States. Here, a condensed introduction and art historical overview are followed by a selection of objects from the other parts of the exhibition.

INTRODUCING MAMI WATA

At once beautiful, protective, seductive, and potentially deadly, the water spirit Mami Wata (Mother Water) is celebrated throughout much of Africa and the African Atlantic worlds. A rich array of arts surrounds both her and a host of other aquatic spirits—honoring the essential, sacred nature of water. Mami Wata is widely believed to have “overseas” origins, and depictions of her have been profoundly influenced by representations of ancient, indigenous African water spirits, European mermaids and snake charmers, Hindu gods and goddesses, and Christian and Muslim saints.

The powerful and pervasive presence of Mami Wata results from a number of factors. Of special note, she can bring good fortune in the form of money, and as a “capitalist” par excellence, her power increased between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, the era of growing trade between Africa and the rest of the world. Her very name is in pidgin English, a language developed to lubricate trade. The countless millions of enslaved Africans who were torn from their homeland and forcibly carried



1 Dona Fish
Ovimbundu peoples, Angola
Circa 1950s–1960s
Wood, pigment, metal, mixed media; 75cm (29½")
Private collection; L2007.19.1

This sculpture comes from Angola where, as in Zambia, Mami Wata is known generally as Dona Fish ("Fish Woman" or "Madam Fish"). This version of Mami Wata is closely related to the water spirit Mamba Muntu of Central Africa. Carved by an Ovimbundu artist, this work was kept in a house as "decoration," but it evoked fear and accusations of "witchcraft" from locals who saw it.

2 Mami Wata shrine figure
Annang Ibibio peoples, southeastern Nigeria
1950s–1960s
Wood, pigment, metal, mixed media; 87.6cm (34½")
Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University 1994.3.9; L2007.63.1

Snakes, ancient and indigenous symbols of African water spirits, frequently accompany Mami Wata, who is often represented as a snake charmer. The partial depiction of Mami Wata's lower torso often provokes viewers to comment that she is "hiding her secret," that is, her fish tail. This sculpture, covered in white, riverine clay, was probably the centerpiece of an elaborate Mami Wata altar used by Annang Ibibio peoples.

across the Atlantic between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries as part of this "trade" brought with them their beliefs, practices, and arts honoring Mami Wata and other ancestral deities. Reestablished, revisualized, and revitalized in diaspora, Mami Wata emerged in new communities and under different guises, among them Lasirèn, Yemanjá, Santa Marta la Dominadora, and Oxum. African-based faiths continue to flourish in communities throughout the Americas, Haiti, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere.

Mami Wata's powers, however, extend far beyond economic gain. Although for some she bestows good fortune and status through monetary wealth, for others, she aids in concerns related to procreation—infertility, impotence, or infant mortality. Some are drawn to her as an irresistible seductive presence who offers the pleasures and powers that accompany devotion to a spiritual force. Yet she also represents danger, for a liaison with Mami Wata often requires a substantial sacrifice, such as the life of a family





member or celibacy in the realm of mortals. Despite this, she is capable of helping women and men negotiate their sexual desires and preferences. Mami also provides a spiritual and professional avenue for women to become powerful priestesses and healers of both psycho-spiritual and physical ailments and to assert female agency in generally male-dominated societies. Rapid socioeconomic changes and the pressures of trying to survive in burgeoning African urban centers have increased the need for the curative powers of Mami Wata priestesses and priests.

The identities of Mami Wata and other aquatic deities are as slippery and amorphous as water itself. Only the frames of history, art, and culture can contain them, giving them shape, contour, substance, and specificity. Yet even these frames are subject to change, and when they undergo a metamorphosis, so do the attributes, personalities, identities, and actions of these fascinating and ambiguous spirits. Worshippers of Mami Wata have typically selected local as well as global images, arts, ideas, and actions, interpreted them according to indigenous precepts, invested them with new meanings, and then re-presented them in novel and dynamic ways to serve their own specific aesthetic,

devotional, social, economic, and political aspirations.

Mami Wata is often portrayed with the head and torso of a woman and the tail of a fish (Fig. 1). Half-fish and half-human, Mami Wata straddles earth and water, culture and nature. She may also take the form of a snake charmer (Fig. 2), sometimes in combination with her mermaid attributes and sometimes separate from them. And as if this formidable water spirit were not complicated enough in her “singular” manifestation, the existence of *mami watas* and *papi watas* must also be acknowledged. They comprise a vast and uncountable “school” of indigenous African water spirits (female and male) that have specific local names and distinctive personalities. These are honored in complex systems of beliefs and practices that may or may not be shared with the water spirit Mami Wata.

An Efik sculpture portraying Mami Wata as a human-fish-goat-priestess handling a bird and a snake (Fig. 3) demonstrates her hybridity and powers of transformation. She can also easily assume aspects of a Hindu god or goddess without sacrificing her identity (Fig. 4). She is a complex multivocal, multifocal symbol with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination,



(opposite page)

3 Mami Wata masquerade headdress
Efik peoples, southeastern Nigeria
1950s
Wood, pigment, animal skin, cloth, raffia; 91.4cm (36")
Private collection; L2007.59.1

This masquerade headdress raises more questions than it answers. It possesses many of Mami Wata's attributes (snakes, fish tail, coiffure), but it also incorporates features that are very surprising, including a bird, goat's head, and figured vessel. Its black, sack-like costume with raffia trim was painted with a skull flanked by two swords.

4 Agbagli Kossi (b. circa 1945, Lome, Togo; active 1960–1990s)
Standing figure of Mami Wata, 1970s (?)
Wood, pigment; 91.4cm (36")
Ignacio and Caroline Villarreal/Ignacio A. Villarreal Collection;
L2007.16.1

The Ewe sculptor Agbagli Kossi was famous for his fantastic repertoire of mami wata spirits combining mermaid and Hindu iconography. Here, he presents one such spirit with a double-headed snake wrapped around her torso, another angularly jointed snake held aloft in her hand, and a Hindu bindi dot painted on her forehead between the eyes to protect against negative forces and to signify her devotion to Mami Wata.

(this page)

5 Sowe/Nowo headdress
Sherbro-Bullom peoples, Sierra Leone
Late 19th century
Wood, pigment; 41.9cm (16½")
Fowler Museum X65.4778; Gift of the Wellcome Trust

This rare late nineteenth-century masquerade headdress alludes to Tingoi/Njaloi, a primordial female water spirit who epitomizes ideal beauty, power, and goodness and presides over female initiation rites among various peoples in Sierra Leone and Liberia. It is worn by a female elder during initiation rituals. The snakes that appear coiled on either side of the head are among the most frequent motifs on such headdresses. Snakes, considered water creatures, are the guardians of the medicines of women's masquerade societies.

generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances: nurturing mother, sexy mama, provider of riches, healer of physical and spiritual ills, embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings. People are attracted to the seemingly limitless possibilities she represents, and at the same time, they are frightened by her destructive potential. She inspires a vast array of emotions, attitudes, and actions among those who worship her, those who fear her, those who study her, and those who create works of art about her. What the Yoruba peoples say about their culture is also applicable to the histories and significances of Mami Wata: She is like a "river that never rests."

"Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas" is an attempt to tell the story of the magical world of mermaids and other fantastic creatures, their myths and seductive powers. It is also about art, belief, globalization, capitalism, and the power of traveling images and ideas to shape the lives of people and communities. Further, it explores how human imagination and cross-cultural exchange serve as catalysts in the artistic representation of these marvelous water divinities. The

exhibition and the book that accompanies it aim to trace various streams of the far-flung, diverse, and complex artistic and devotional traditions for Mami Wata. Some may share sources and directions; others with shared sources may diverge; some with different sources may converge; and every combination of the above may occur at different times and in different places.

SOURCES AND CURRENTS

From the earliest images on the continent and throughout the millennia, diverse African cultures have stressed the value and power of water not only as a source of sustenance, but also as a focus of spiritual and artistic expression. Many early depictions of spiritual entities assumed the form of hybrid creatures, part-human, part-aquatic. In other words, the cosmological and artistic frameworks were already present in many local contexts to make the introduction of newer water divinities, such as Mami Wata, a natural progression.

A primordial female water spirit sometimes known as Tingoi/Njaloi epitomizes ideal yet unattainable beauty, power, and goodness. She presides over female initiation rites among various



6 Saltcellar
Sapi peoples, Sherbro Island
Late 15th century
Ivory; 16cm (6¼")
The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen; L2007.89.1

This saltcellar bears the earliest known African image of a mermaid. It was commissioned by a visiting Portuguese client who supplied the carver with an image of a European mermaid. The sculptor immediately "Africanized" her: she is flanked by two crocodiles.

7 Edward A. Asamani (b. circa 1880, Ghana; active 1900–1930s)
Mermaid staff finial, circa 1910–1914
Ivory; 25.4cm (10")
Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection; L2007.69.3

About 1900, in the northern Ewe town of Kpando, Edward A. Asamani, a missionary-trained carpenter who had become an artist, carved souvenirs for German soldiers and colonial officials. Following the departure of the Germans at the end of World War I, he began carving ivory and ebony chiefly emblems for British and local patrons. This ivory mermaid may have been a finial for a royal counselor's staff or umbrella.



peoples in Sierra Leone and Liberia, including Mende, Temne, Bullom, Vai, Gola, Dei, Krim, Kissi, and Bassa (Lamp 1985, Boone 1986, Phillips 1995:37). Tingoi/Njaloi is often likened to a mermaid (Phillips 1995:53–4), and Muslim Mende peoples speak of her as a female *jina*, or spirit, with the lower body of a fish. Soweï/Nowo initiation headdresses from this region offer deep and complex allusions to Tingoi/Njaloi as well as to social practices and cosmic forces. They are worn by women elders during the initiations of young girls. A zigzag motif found on the forehead of some of these headdresses may be a glyph for water, and young Sande/Bondo girls are said to "go under the water" during the first part of their initiation (Boone 1986:50, 170). Among the Temne, as Frederick Lamp notes, "water is the gestating fluid of rebirth, called, in the esoteric language of initiation, *yankoila*, 'Mother Water'" (1985:42).

A rare and elegant late nineteenth-century Soweï/Nowo headdress from the Sherbro-Bullom peoples of Sierra Leone features the idealized attributes and beauty of a young woman (Fig. 5). The ringed neck suggests ripples of water, as if the spirit has just emerged from the depths (*ibid.*, p. 36). It may also resemble the chrysalis of a moth or butterfly as a sign of beauty and female transformation (*ibid.*, p. 32). The snakes that appear coiled on either side of the head are among the most frequent motifs depicted on Soweï/Nowo headdresses. Generally considered to be water creatures, snakes reveal a constellation of ideas about ancient African water spirits and, later, Mami Wata. They are the guardians of the medicines of Sande/Bondo, and shrine sculptures often depict a female-headed coiled snake or a female head and neck encircled by a snake (Phillips 1995:146, Fig. 7.6). Wall paintings of Tingoi/Njaloi sometimes show her as a serpent-fish with a human head adorned by elegantly arranged and luxuriant hair (*ibid.*, p. 54, Fig. 3.6).

This elaborate coiffure resonates with later descriptions and representations of Mami Wata. Among the Sherbro, rich, full hair is a sign of beauty and health, and women interweave black cotton with their own hair to achieve volume (MacCormack 1980b:106). For the Mende, the thickness and length of hair are emblematic of the productive organic growth and fertility essential to femininity (Boone 1986:96–7, 138; see Jell-Bahlsen forthcoming for a dis-



8 Ritual bell
Edo Kingdom of Benin
18th–19th century
Ivory; 22.9cm (9")
Private collection; L2007.59.21

A janus, double-tailed figure crowns this Benin ivory ritual bell. Below it, the standing, "mudfish-legged" figure with a crown, sword, staff, snake, and fish represents the king of Benin, the *oba*, and his divine link with Olokun.

9 Wooden box lid
Owo-Yoruba peoples, Owo, Nigeria
18th–19th century
Wood; 45.7cm (18")
Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection;
L2007.69.1

The imagery on this box lid portrays a female fish-tailed figure who grasps her breasts as her tail curls around behind her. Such containers were the possessions of high-status individuals or rulers, who might have used the mermaid to associate themselves with Olokun, divinity of the sea, and by extension, the *oba*.



cussion of Mami's hair among the Igbo.). The flat circular form over the broad forehead in the illustrated headdress may be a mirror or older form of amulet. Mirrors often refer to the surface of water and are attributes of mermaids, as well as of the graduates of Sande/Bondo who, during their "coming out" ceremony, sit in state and gaze meditatively into them (Phillips 1995:84, Fig. 4.12).

THE MERMAID—A EUROPEAN WATER SPIRIT ARRIVES

Mermaids, and to a lesser extent mermen, have populated the human imagination for millennia. Some of the earliest have their origins in the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia (e.g., the merman spirit of River Urat, circa 900 BCE, in the Museum of Ethnology, Berlin-Dahlem), Africa's Nile Valley, and later the Mediterranean world of the Phoenicians, Minoans, Greeks, and Romans. For the Greeks and Romans, mermaids—like the part-bird, part-human sirens—symbolized danger. In Christian Europe of the Middle Ages, the mermaid entered bestiaries and other arts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, where she usually appeared in a strongly moralizing context as a symbol of vanity, immorality, seduction, and danger (see Hassig 1999).

By the fifteenth century, when Europeans began to explore beyond Mediterranean waters, they carried with them images

of mythic creatures—dragons, griffins, unicorns, centaurs, and especially the mermaid. These images assumed different forms within the material culture of sailors, merchants, and explorers and might appear as book illustrations, prints, playing cards, flags and other heraldic devices, trademarks (like the mermaids and mermen on Dutch clay pipes traded in many parts of Africa since the seventeenth century), watermarks, and perhaps tattoos. Songs, dances, games, and the playing of musical instruments may also have made direct reference to sirens or mermaids. European belief in the existence of such creatures is confirmed by the fact that in January of 1493 Christopher Columbus recorded the sighting of three mermaids off the coast of Haiti, then known as Hispaniola. He wrote that they "came quite high out of the water" but were "not so beautiful as painted, though to some extent they have the form of a human face" (Columbus 1493 [2001]:154).

At about the same time that Christopher Columbus was seeing mermaids in the Atlantic, an African sculptor, a member of the Sapi peoples living on Sherbro Island off the coast of Sierra Leone, was carving the image of one on an ivory saltcellar, commissioned by a visiting Portuguese explorer or merchant (Fig. 6). As his model, the artist used an image supplied to him by his Portuguese client.¹ Though the mermaid was copied from a



10 Armband
Owo-Yoruba peoples, Owo, Nigeria
16th–17th century
Ivory; 12cm (4¾")
The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen; L2007.89.2

The double-tailed mermaid was probably introduced into the Benin Kingdom and adjacent areas in the late fifteenth or sixteenth century by the Portuguese. This armband depicts fish- and crocodile-legged figures alternating with mythical snake-winged bats with ears who hang upside down.

11 Oshugbo Society lodge door panel
Ijebu-Yoruba peoples, Nigeria
19th–20th century
Wood; 151.8cm (59¾")
New Orleans Museum of Art 89.283; Museum Purchase, Robert P. Gordy Fund

This Oshugbo lodge door panel presents Olokun as a fish-tailed figure holding two mudfish. The themes of life and death, sacrifice, transformation, continuity, and infinity run through the three major divisions of this door panel: a huge coiled snake devours a man with a sword; a frog and chameleon represent liminality and transformation; and intricate interlaces without beginning or end are signs of infinity.



European model, the Sapi sculptor immediately “Africanized” her, for she is flanked by two crocodiles, ancient African symbols for water spirits and a central image associated with water spirits among the Sapi’s descendants, the Bullom and Temne.² As their familiarity with European mermaid lore increased, Africans interpreted, adapted, and transformed the image of a European mermaid (and, later, other images) into a representation of an African deity—Mami Wata—evolving elaborate systems of belief and sacred visual and performance arts in the process.

Although the wellspring of the visual culture and history of Mami Wata will always remain conjectural,³ I would suggest that much textual and visual evidence indicates that the concept of Mami Wata, if not her name,⁴ originated long before the massive dispersal of Africans to the Americas (from the sixteenth to nineteenth century) and the colonial era (1900–1957). The antiquity and prevalence of indigenous African beliefs in water deities, widely imaged as hybrid human-aquatic creatures,⁵ served as a basis to understand and translate European mermaid myths and images (Fig. 7) into African ones from the first momentous Euro-African contacts in the fifteenth century.

THE DOUBLE-TAILED MERMAID—BENIN AND YORUBA

Another version of the mermaid, one with a double tail, was probably introduced by the Portuguese in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. This image has had a major impact on the West

African coast in the Benin Kingdom and among the neighboring Owo- and Ijebu-Yoruba.

At Benin, images of the Portuguese were quickly incorporated into the royal arts of the court (ivories, bronze sculptures, plaques, musical instruments, textiles, and so forth) because these newcomers were immediately associated with wealth from the sea, with Olokun, the god of the sea, and therefore, with the divine ruler on land, the king, or *oba*. Judging a motif’s “centrality to culture” can be highly problematic. Its reception and integration depend on where and how it fits within an existing, evolving cultural system, a concept that is crucial in the complex histories of Mami Wata images and ideas. I believe the striking imagery and popularity of the double-tailed European mermaids



15 This photograph of a water spirit headdress was taken by J. A. Green in the Niger River Delta town of Bonny by 1901. It demonstrates the influence of the Friedlander snake charmer chromolithograph (Fig. 14), which was clearly the inspiration for its subject. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE NIGERIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEG. NO. 106.94.17

we cannot know much about its other possible meanings. Such objects were, however, the possessions of high-status individuals, chiefs, or rulers, who would presumably have had interactions with court officials from Benin, and therefore might have used the mermaid to associate themselves with Olokun and, by extension, the *oba*.

Owo ivory carvers were probably the primary sculptors working for the courts in Owo and Benin City between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Abiodun 1989:104). An intricately carved armband (Fig. 10) with dangling ivory bells depicts fish-and-crocodile-legged figures that refer to Olokun as well as to the mystical aspects of the divine king. These alternate with mythical snake-winged bats that hang upside down (see Willett 1988:121–7, Drewal 1989:120ff.). Such an alternating arrangement suggests multiple perspectives and the fluid, liminal space between worldly and otherworldly realms.

An intricately carved Oshugbo lodge (*iledi*) door panel pres-

ents a fabulous array of intriguing images, among them a fish-tailed figure that holds in its large hands two mudfish (Fig. 11). This is Olokun. The themes of life and death, sacrifice, transformation, continuity, and infinity run through the three major divisions of this door panel. Three is an Oshugbo/Ogboni sacred number, referring to woman, man, and creator/witness (Drewal 1989a:243, n. 54, Drewal 1989b:70; see also Lawal 1995). At the top a huge coiled snake devours a man with a sword, while another diminutive warrior rides his steed. A frog and a chameleon suggest liminality and transformation. Intricate interlaces, signs of infinity, have no beginning and no end. In the center section, a mounted warrior grasps two kneeling figures who wear amulet gourds suspended from their belts. At the bottom of the panel is Olokun, the fish-tailed figure with oblique lines radiating from the head and mirroring the fish tail. These lines suggest the feelers (barbells) that issue from the heads of mudfish.



16 Joseph Kossivi Ahiator (b. 1956, Aflao, Ghana)
Indian King of Mami Wata, 2005
 Pigment, cloth; 267cm (105")
 Fowler Museum X2005.5.1; Museum Purchase

Ghanaian artist Joseph Kossivi Ahiator, inspired by a Hindu print of Vishnu, created this complex painting of a host of Mami Wata spirits that he calls "India Spirits." Kossivi was born with India spirits and he visits India often, sometimes in his dreams, sometimes while at the beach along Ghana's coast. In 2005 Kossivi had vivid dreams of a nineteen-headed Indian king spirit together with his nine-headed queen. He dreamed that he was swimming with them in the ocean and thereafter called the male "King of Mami Wata" and his queen "NaKrishna." He has gathered these spirits under the ancient African celestial rainbow serpent deity Dan Aida Wedo, thus forging links between Africa, India, the sea, and ultimately the African Atlantic where Dambala Wedo continues to be venerated by Haitians and others.

FROM MALAMADAMATJAUTE TO MAMI WATA

Half-human, half-serpent images for water spirits, widespread throughout Africa—like the half-human, half-fish creatures discussed above—set the stage for the arrival and incorporation of a very particular European image of an "Oriental other" that resonated deeply within African water spirit arts: a snake charmer.

The West has had a long and enduring fascination with the "exotic."⁷ By the second half of the nineteenth century, this European interest in the exotic had spread beyond the European upper and middle classes to a much wider audience. During the Victorian era, with its rigid social norms, people turned to the exotic to provide a "temporary *frisson*, a circumscribed experience of the bizarre" (Clifford 1981:542). Institutions such as botanical and zoological gardens, ethnographic museums, and especially circuses provided vehicles for such escape.

One of the most significant centers for such developments was the northern German port and trading center of Hamburg, which was in many ways Europe's gateway to the exotic (cf. Bitterli 1976, Debrunner 1979). There, a man named Carl G.C. Hagen-



beck worked as a fish merchant in St. Pauli in the port area of Hamburg, an area that was also a popular “entertainment” center for sailors and others. In 1848, a fisherman who worked the Arctic waters brought some sea lions to Hagenbeck, which he in turn exhibited as a zoological “attraction.” The immediate success of this venture led to a rapidly enlarged menagerie of exotic animals from Greenland, Africa, and Asia (Niemeyer 1972:247).

Sensing the public’s enormous appetite for the bizarre, Hagenbeck decided to expand his imports to include another curiosity—exotic people. This was the modest beginning of a new concept in popular entertainment known as the *Volkerschauen*, or “People Shows” (Benninghof-Luhl 1984). In order to advertise his new attractions, Hagenbeck turned to Adolph Friedlander, a leading printer who quickly began to produce a large corpus of inexpensive color posters for Hagenbeck.

Hagenbeck hired a famous hunter named Breitwieser to travel to Southeast Asia and the Pacific to collect rare snakes, insects, and butterflies. In addition to these, Breitwieser brought back a wife, who under the stage name “Maladamatjaute” began to perform as a snake charmer in Hagenbeck’s production.⁸ A chromolithograph poster made for Hagenbeck by Freidlander’s company in the 1880s featured her (Fig. 12; Malhotra 1979:99). A Hamburg studio photograph taken about 1887 shows Maladamatjaute attired for her performance (Fig. 13).⁹ The style and cut of her bodice, the stripes made of buttons, the coins about her waist, the armlets, the position of the snake around her neck and a second one nearby, the nonfunctional bifurcated flute held in her hand, and her facial features and coiffure: all duplicate those seen in a snake charmer chromolithograph from the Freidlander

lithographic company, the original of which has not yet been found.¹⁰ What we do have, however, is a reprint, made in 1955 in Bombay, India, by the Shree Ram Calendar Company from an original sent to them by two (Indian?) merchants in Kumase, Ghana (Fig. 14). In a letter to me dated June 17, 1977, the manager of the Calendar Company stated that the print had been copied “without changing a line even from the original.”

There can be little doubt, therefore, that Maladamatjaute was the model for the image. Her light brown skin placed her beyond Europe, while the boldness of her gaze and the strangeness of her occupation epitomized for Europeans her “otherness” and the mystery and wonder of the “Orient.” As Maladamatjaute’s fame as a snake charmer spread, her image began to appear in circus flyers and show posters for the Folies Bergère in Paris (see, for example, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, no. 480), as well as in the United States. Soon after, and probably unknown to Maladamatjaute, her image spread to Africa—but for very different reasons and imbued with very new meanings.

Not long after its publication in Europe, the snake charmer chromolithograph reached West Africa, probably carried by African sailors who had seen it in Hamburg. European merchants stationed in Africa, whether Germans or others, may have also brought Maladamatjaute’s seductive image to decorate their work or domestic spaces.¹¹

For African viewers, the snake charmer’s light brown skin and long black wavy hair suggested that she came from beyond Africa, and the print had a dramatic and almost immediate impact. By 1901, about fifteen years after its appearance in Hamburg, the snake charmer image had already been interpreted



(opposite page)

17 Print of the Hindu deity Dattatreya
Before 1975

Chromolithograph; 20.3cm (8")

Private collection; L2007.59.4

An Indian print depicting the Hindu god Dattatreya, sold in the markets of Ghana, Togo, and Benin, as well as elsewhere in West Africa, is interpreted as a male Mami Wata spirit, or *papi wata*. Often described as Densu, Mami Wata's husband, he is said to be the "gift giver" who through dreams shows the path to riches, as evidenced by the gold jewelry he holds in his hands.

18 Standing male figure

Ibibio peoples (?), Nigeria

Date unknown

Wood, pigment; 38.1cm (15")

Yale University Art Gallery 2006.51.443; Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933, Collection

This sculpture of the *papi wata* spirit Densu, whose many hands provide riches, would have graced an altar or Mami Wata table.

(this page)

19 Janus Densu/Mami Wata figure

Ewe peoples, Ghana

Early 20th century

Wood, pigment; 62.9cm (24¾")

Collection of Rene Bravmann

This figure of a Mami Wata spirit was inspired by the multiheaded and multiarmed images of Hindu gods and goddesses. It also draws upon Mami's earlier mermaid iconography (note the small fish tail at the back) and evokes as well her snake charmer manifestation with a coiled snake resting on top of the sculpture.

as an African water spirit, translated into a three-dimensional carved image, and incorporated into a Niger River Delta water spirit headdress that was photographed by J.A. Green in the Delta town of Bonny (Fig. 15).¹² The headdress clearly shows the inspiration of the Hamburg print. Note especially the long, black hair parted in the middle, the garment's neckline, the earrings, the position of the figure's arms and the snakes, and the low-relief rendering of the inset with a kneeling flute player surrounded by four snakes. The image of Maladamatjante, the "Hindoo" snake charmer of European and American renown, had begun a new life as the primary icon for Mami Wata, an African water divinity with overseas origins, joining and sometimes replacing her manifestation as a mermaid.

MAMI WATA ICONS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, the vast majority of visitors from overseas that Africans encountered were European or American. By the early twentieth century, however, as Europeans established a colonial presence in Africa, other peoples from European-influenced areas, such as Lebanon and the British colony of India, began to arrive. They came as traders and, like the Europeans before them, were associated by Africans with wealth from overseas. In the 1930s and 1940s (possibly inspired in part by Mahatma Gandhi's successful campaign for India's independence and by African soldiers serving in South Asia during World War II), Indian material culture in the form of images in books, pamphlets, films, and popular devotional chromolithographs (Bae 2003), as well as the votive practices of Indian traders in Africa, came to have a profound impact on Mami Wata worshippers, their

icons, and their ritual actions (Fig. 16).

A new episode in the development of the visual culture of Mami Wata began in the 1940s–1950s. The popularity of the snake charmer lithograph and the presence of Indian merchants (and films) in West Africa led to a growing fascination with Indian prints of Hindu gods and goddesses. In various places, especially along the Ghana-Nigeria coast, people began to interpret these deities as representations of a host of *mami wata* spirits associated with specific bodies and levels of water. Using these prints as guides for making icons in wood, clay, and other media, performing rituals, and preparing altars known as "Mami Wata tables," devotees expanded the pantheon of water spirits, fostering an ever-growing complexity in Mami Wata worship, which includes elements of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, astrology, European spiritualist and occult beliefs and practices, and so forth (Drewal 1988a,b,c, 2002b). The openness of such belief systems offers "eternal potential" (Rush 1999:61, 1992). As Dana Rush notes, the Hindu chromolithographs that have flooded *vodunland* (i.e., Ghana, Togo, and Benin) possess both external and internal mobility. They are easily reproduced and transported, and they are "inwardly mobile" since their "inherent forms and meanings do not remain stationary" (1999:62). They continually move, change, shift, and multiply.

Take for example, the chromolithographic image of the triple-headed, multi-armed Hindu deity Dattatreya (Fig. 17). For Ewe Mami Wata worshippers, it represents Densu, a *papi wata* spirit associated with a river in Ghana. He is called the "triple gift giver" and is a source of enormous wealth as explained by the artist of the mural in the shrine of renowned Mami Wata



20 Kwame Akoto, aka Almighty God (b. 1950, Kumase, Ghana)

Self-Portrait with the Artist's Tormentors, 1997

Paint on wood; 92cm (36¼")

Fowler Museum X97.10.5; Museum Purchase

The artist Kwame Akoto, who has adopted the name Almighty God, founded a prolific painting workshop in Kumase, Ghana, in the 1970s. Over the years Akoto complained about being bothered by Mami Wata (and seductive women in general), the forest spirit Tata Buta, and Saint Anthony. In 1991, Akoto underwent a religious conversion and joined the Living Faith Centre Pentecostal Church. Since that time he has created moralizing pictures based upon his new faith and expressing his opposition to smoking, drinking, and prostitution. In *Self-Portrait with the Artist's Tormentors*, Akoto depicts himself trying to paint while being tormented by Tata Buta, Mami Wata, and Saint Anthony (believed by the artist to be Satan in disguise).

priestess Affi Yeye in Benin. An Ibibio (?) variant copies the print closely (Fig. 18) and another, from the Ewe, combines Hindu and mermaid elements (Fig. 19).

As Mami Wata's popularity increased and spread from the colonial period to the 1970s, many devotees came to conceive of her as resembling a Christian saint who used her spiritual powers for the benefit of her followers. Seeking to strengthen this resemblance, they modeled their arts and devotional practices on those of Christianity and a generalized "European" etiquette (see Drewal 1988c:176–80 for a description of The House of the Holy Trinity [La Maison de la Sainte Trinité] in Togo). In the Republic of Benin (the former Dahomey), "Papa Nouveau," the Christian "prophet" of an independent church, became very influential because he was believed to be the husband of Mami Wata (Auge 1969:184–6, 195).

Within the last twenty to thirty years, however, Mami Wata's engagement with modernity, morality, Christianity, and Islam has led to dramatic transformations in the ways she is depicted and understood. For some, her dangerous and seductive attributes align her with the forces of Satan. Mami has thus become a primary target of a widespread and growing religious movement led by evangelical (Pentecostal) Christians and fundamentalist Muslims who seek to denigrate and demonize indigenous African faiths (Fig. 20; see Gore forthcoming and Nevadomsky forthcoming for more contemporary disputes and negotiations between Mami Wata followers and Pentecostal Christians in Benin City, Nigeria). For these groups, Mami Wata has come to personify immorality, sin, and damnation. She is considered one of the most powerful presences of Satan, one whose work is to seduce women and men away from the "path of righteousness" (See essays on this topic in Drewal forthcoming; Meyer, Gore, Elleh, Hackett, Kisliuk, and Moyer; see also Michelle Gilbert 2003:353–79 and n. 17, who cites a similar situation in Cameroon, the DRC, and Sierra Leone in the works of Geschiere 1997, De Boek 1999, and R. Shaw 1997).

MAMI WATA IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Cultural case studies complement the visual history overview to demonstrate how, why, and where persons and communities have created arts honoring Mami Wata for their own specific purposes. Both historical and cultural perspectives help us comprehend the extraordinary diversity and complexity, similarities and differences, of the circumstances that shape artistic, religious, and cultural practices and the lives of people. What follows are a few examples of works to give you a sense of the richness and diversity of art for Mami Wata and other water spirits in Africa and beyond.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

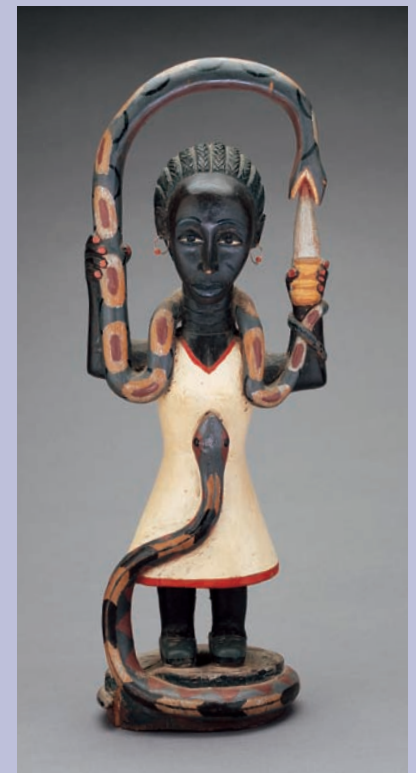
Masks and sculptures (Fig. 22) depicting Mami Wata are made by a wide diversity of artists in south and central Côte d'Ivoire, and their late twentieth-century styles are often indistinguishable from each other. These artists, who include Baule, Guro, Yaure, Wan, Anyi, and Attie peoples, work for a varied clientele composed of locals and foreigners. Ivoirians use these artworks for dances, shrines, divination sessions, or as interior decor in modern homes, and foreigners acquire them as souvenirs and for decorative purposes. This market situation seems especially appropriate for a subject like Mami Wata, for she herself is a product of transcultural and transnational encounters and commercial transactions. Created for such a diverse market, these masks and sculptures reflect the ingenuity of artists who are able to combine indigenous aesthetics with a sensitivity to international tastes and to incorporate fantastic new imagery, including that inspired by a variety of Hindu chromolithographs sold by itinerant African merchants since the 1950s (Holas 1969:116–17).

JOLLY MASQUERADES—FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

Jolly masquerade societies developed in Freetown in the middle of the twentieth century as an amalgamation of varied traditions. They continue to be composed of young men who perform—primarily at Christmas, New Year's celebrations, and occasions such as weddings—in exchange for funds. Their masquerades are held in the streets, private residences, city parks, and other public spaces. Performing in ornate female attire, Jolly masqueraders have taken the “fancy” aesthetic of young men's masquerades to new artistic heights, splicing together materials and motifs from around the globe (Fig. 21; Nunley 1981:52–9).



21 John Goba (b. 1944, Matru Jong, Sierra Leone) Headdress, 1980s (?) Wood, pigment, fabric, netting, beads, metal fiber; 75cm (29½") Collection of Jeremiah Cole; L2007.9.1 The lively imagination of Temne artist John Goba brings together ferocious horned animals, dancing snakes, a mother with children, and a multiheaded, rainbow-necked Hindu goddess to evoke a fantastic swirl of forces surrounding Mami Wata in this masquerade headdress from Freetown, Sierra Leone. Mami's fish tail is visible at the back of the headdress.



22 Sculpture of woman with snakes Baule peoples, Côte d'Ivoire Circa 1970s Wood, paint; 56cm (22") Fowler Museum X95.43.5; Gift of Philip Ravenhill and Judith Timyan This sculpture may have served as a spirit spouse figure, as part of a Mami Wata altar, as a display figure for the performance of a diviner (*komyen*), or perhaps as decoration in a modern Baule household. It embodies hopes and fears through references to wealth and modernity (the woman's dress, earrings, and beads) as well as to violence (the knife held in the figure's left hand and grasped at its tip by her snake companion).

GHANA, TOGO, AND BENIN

The peoples who live in the coastal region ranging from Ghana to Togo and Benin are culturally and linguistically related and include the Ga, Ewe, Mina, Aja, Gun, Fon, and Tori. These groups have an intimate association with the sea and with water divinities, and they worship a vast pantheon of spiritual entities generally known as Vodun (Blier 1995). Mami Wata exists as part of, yet apart from, the Vodun. The Fon, for example, have their own freshwater deities called Tohosu, and they consider these to be distinct from Mami Wata, who is regarded specifically as a saltwater divinity. Others believe Mami represents a vast “school” of female and male water spirits (*mami watas* and *papi watas*), while still others see her as the source of all Vodun. Given these diverse conceptions, Mami Wata, who is generally acknowledged to be an African divinity with overseas origins, is honored in arts that bring together ancient and indigenous rites; images, beliefs, and practices from near and far; and elements from the global marketplace.

Tori potter Akpogla Togbo Ekpon is a devotee of the Vodun spirit Dange, a deity who deals with psychological issues and is associated with the python.¹² She creates wares for a very diverse, urban clientele seeking flowerpots and decorative items for their homes, as well as elaborate “modern” shrine sculptures for their guardian spirits.¹³ Ekpon, who works in the outskirts of Porto-Novo, Benin, in a small commercial pottery factory that produces utilitarian ware, is renowned for her ritual vessels for the Vodun. Her work is highly detailed, naturalistic, and “modernized,” as she describes it, compared to the older, more abstract vessels that were made by her aunts and grandmothers. She has emphasized how she strives to decorate and refine her forms, create a pleasing symmetry and proportion, and finish the work with a smooth, finely polished surface. One of her pieces (Fig. 23), a mermaid with a comb, mirror, and clay cowries in a clay shell for divination is Mami Apouke.

Ouidah, a town on the Atlantic coast of the Republic of Benin, has a hybrid population and a fascinating history of transatlantic connections with Brazil over several centuries. It is a history of movement, of ebb and flow, and the departures and returns of bodies, minds, and arts. The Agudas (which may be derived from “Ajuda,” the Portuguese name for Ouidah), one segment of Ouidah’s population, are descendants of liberated or exiled Africans of diverse backgrounds (Yoruba, Hausa, Nupe, Fon, Ewe-Mina, Mahin, Kongo) who, following enslavement in Brazil, returned to Africa in the nineteenth century, settling primarily in Lome, Ouidah, Porto Novo, and Lagos. There they established themselves as a privileged merchant class, acting as middlemen between the indigenous peoples and the Portuguese and other Europeans. Forming a community in the process, they came to see themselves as Brazilians of African or of mixed European and African descent, rather than as Africans returned from Brazil.

One of the cultural traditions Agudas brought from Brazil was the masquerade known in Benin as Bourian. It probably derives from two eighteenth-century Brazilian masking traditions, the *Burrinha* (Little Donkey) and the *Bumba-meu-Boi* (Bumba-my-Ox), which combine Portuguese, Brazilian, and Afro-Brazilian elements. In Brazil these masquerades are associated with Catholic celebrations of Epiphany, or the day of the Three Kings (January 6). In Ouidah, however, Bourian has become a largely secular entertainment that may occur any time of the year to celebrate Aguda family events such as baptisms, marriages, graduations, funerals, and reunions. The humorous and often bawdy performances poke fun at human foibles. The de Souza and de Nevis families, both Aguda, perform Bourian in Ouidah, and it is here that Mami Wata makes her appearance (Fig. 24).



23 Akpogla Togbo Ekpon (b. circa 1960, near Porto-Novo, Benin)
Mami Apouke with mirror and comb, 2004
Terra-cotta; 63.5cm (25")
Private collection; L2007.59.14

The Tori potter Akpogla Togbo Ekpon makes elaborate “modern” shrine sculptures for the guardian spirits of her clients. Ekpon is renowned for her ritual vessels for the deities.

24 Members of the de Souza family (Ouidah, Benin)
Bourian ensemble for Mami Wata, 2005

Fabric, metal, jewelry, wig

Fowler Museum at UCLA; TR2007.6.1a-j

The Bourian masking tradition is marked by the appearance of a series of masked figures who dance and parade in the large family compound, put on short skirts, and go about the town to perform for relatives and friends. An orchestra of ten to twenty musicians plays samba or marching music, employing an eclectic mixture of African, Brazilian, and European instruments. A chorus of women and men sings in Yoruba/Nago mixed with Portuguese to announce and celebrate the masqueraders as they enter and perform. The cast of masked characters varies greatly and includes animal and human types—Donkey, Lion, Elephant, Rat, Zorro, Oliver Hardy, and political caricatures of Charles de Gaulle, François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac, George Bush, and Bill Clinton. As the chorus sings, Mami Wata moves majestically through the crowd, her consort or husband, Papaï, at her side along with a bodyguard in a carnival costume who carries a heavy wooden mallet and wears tennis shoes.





25 Mma mask

Igbo peoples, north central Igboland, Nigeria

Circa 1960

Wood, cloth, pigment; 76.2cm (30")

Collection of the African Art Museum of the SMA Fathers; Gift of Dr. Bernard and Patricia Wagner, 2005; L2007.14.1

This mask is a testament to the multiple spiritual forces present in Igboland. Here Mami Wata is depicted with Jesus on the cross, priests or saints, and the Madonna. These masks, probably carved in the 1950s or 1960s, visualize local religious and ideological negotiations of a particular era.

26 Mami Wata figure

Igbo peoples, Ogoja (?), Nigeria

1950s

Wood, pigment; 145cm (57")

Collection of Charles D. Miller III; L2007.68.1

Mami Wata's image and its significance have been appropriated and transformed by the Ejagham, eastern neighbors of the Igbo in the Cross River State of Nigeria. This large figure, carved in the 1950s by an Igbo sculptor in the vicinity of Ogoja, may have adorned a Mami Wata shrine, but more likely it was commissioned by an Ejagham women's secret society. Other Ejagham women's societies interpret the figure as a young mother fresh from her seclusion after the birth of her first child. She thus would have embodied the "ideals of an Ejagham beauty."



NIGERIA

For the Igbo peoples of southeastern Nigeria, the name "Mami Wata" refers to a specific water spirit and to a "school" of indigenous water spirits with specific local names and attributes. Such water deities, related to, yet separate from, a vast pantheon of gods and goddesses (*agbara*), are considered "free spirits" who exist outside the public cult system (Cole 1982:62). Mami Wata works with diviners and priest/healers helping clients with physical and psychological ailments. She also intervenes in money matters, since she is thought to have "been brought by white men, whom people believe to have endless supplies of paper money and coins" (Cole 1982:64–5; see also Cole and Aniakor 1984:75–7, 104–6; Jones 1984:89).

A mask honoring spiritual forces in the Igbo cosmos depicts Mami Wata with three Christian images (Fig. 25): Jesus on the cross, a robed priest or saint, and a Madonna-like figure. Such juxtapositions recall conversations I had with Mami Wata devotees in 1975 and 1978. One Igbo woman related that Mami Wata was a Christian and compared the preparation of a church altar with its candles, flowers, statues, incense, and chromolithographs to that of a Mami Wata shrine. Alphonsius Njoku, a Mami Wata priest and healer, explained the presence of a Madonna and Child print in his shrine by asserting that Mami Wata was a Christian. When I asked what type of Christian, he replied that she belongs to "every church, she is non-denominational."¹⁴ Another priestess—who, while in a trance, sang a song evocative of a Christian hymn to me in a mixture of Igbo and pidgin English—remarked that Mami Wata was a Christian and "beat" those who failed to go to church.¹⁵ Before the 1980s, Mami Wata very much resembled a Catholic saint to her devotees, and these masks, probably carved in the 1950s or 1960s, visualize local religious and ideological debates, dialogues, and negotiations of a particular era (see Elleh forthcoming for a discussion of these religious contestations and their impact on Mami Wata icons). The Igbo's northeastern neighbors, the Ejagham, borrowed Mami's image to signify their own spiritual entities for local purposes (Fig. 26).



27 Mami Wata mask
 Annang Ibibio peoples, southeastern Nigeria
 1950s–1960s
 Wood, pigment; 46.4cm (18¼")
 High Museum of Art 72.40.155; Fred and Rita Richman Collection
 This elegant mask celebrates the beauty of young women who have gone through an initiatory period of education prior to marriage. It thus also alludes to the ancient local water deity Eka Abassi, "Mother of God," who presides over initiation rites and protects and blesses the girls. Eka Abassi is also called Nnem Mmo and eventually came to be known as Mami Wata.



28 Akpan Chukwu or John Onyok, Annang Ibibio peoples, southeastern Nigeria
 Mami Wata figure, 1950s
 Wood, paint, raffia; 40.6cm (16")
 Collection of Herbert M. and Shelley Cole; L2007.22.1
 Based on a nineteenth-century chromolithograph of a snake charmer from Hamburg, Germany, this shrine sculpture of Mami Wata was carved by the Ibibio artist Akpan Chukwu. Through the use of rich jewelry in the form of a necklace and waist ornament, the figure emphasizes the involvement of Mami Wata in matters of wealth.

IBIBIO

Among the Ibibio, although Mami Wata could bestow great riches (Fig. 27), she could also wreak havoc according to her whim. She could possess men and women and lure them to her watery kingdom while they were bathing or entice them to follow her through fantastic dreams. Her devotees might take on an otherworldly appearance and behave strangely. While they could become wealthy, they would be unable to bear children, a decided disadvantage in a culture that prizes fecundity. Some people, however, reveled in their communication with the spirit and became Mami Wata priests or priestesses in their own right. Great wealth and prestige could accrue to priests and priestesses from creating private "hospitals" where impotent men, barren women, and those suffering from mental problems would pay high fees to be treated using various modalities, including drugs, electric shock treatment, and lengthy counseling sessions. Furthermore, traditional Ibibio society is male dominated, and the ability of a woman to be possessed by Mami Wata offered her nearly her only chance to achieve the status accorded to men (Salmons 1977:10).

The commissioning of carvings for these many Mami Wata adherents explains their prevalence in the 1970s. Members of the Chukwu family, who produced many such carvings, perpetuated Akpan's unusual carpentry style of using precise measurements to carve individual segments of Mami Wata, which were then nailed together. Other carvers, however, such as Udunwa Matthew Ekpe and John Onyok, adopted a much freer approach, while still incorporating key elements such as the entwining snake, the bugler/snake charmer, the elaborate jewelry, and the long flowing hair of Mami Wata (Fig. 28). Variations, such as Mami Wata riding in a canoe flanked by paddlers, or atop a box tableau surrounded by her devotees, were commissioned both for the shrine context or for local entertainment groups and were also sold to tourists or other ethnic groups through the craft markets of Ikot Ekpene and Calabar.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

In the social imaginary of the western Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a wide expanse of water separates the world of the ancestors from that of the living. It also separates Mputu (Europe) from Africa. The siren or mermaid, whose element is water, is preeminently a mediator between these worlds. More a lover than a goddess, she assists men in their quest for power and wealth within a universe set in motion by colonial modernization (Figs. 29–31). Her assistance, however, comes at a terrible price.

The earliest stories of encounters between sirens and local men appeared after World War II, written for literary competitions. At this time urban music inspired by the Cuban rumba was obsessed with seduction and consumption (early songs advertised cigarettes, margarine, and Coca-Cola). Musicians sang of men and women forlorn in the urban world and desperate for money to spend on consumer goods.

While men were wage earners, those described as “free women” (residing in urban centers away from their families) were excluded from the workforce and offered men domestic and sexual services in exchange for money. These negotiated sexual relationships were typically temporary and almost contractual. The social space of men was the bar, where clothing, the consumption of beer and music could make a reputation.



29 Artist unknown (Lubumbashi area, Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Mamba Muntu, circa 1980
Acrylic on canvas; 40.6cm x 56.4cm (16" x 22¼")
Private collection

30 Abdal 22 (active 1980s–early 1990s, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Mami Wata, 1989
Acrylic on canvas; 58.4cm x 45.7cm (23" x 18")
Private collection; L2007.13.3

From the 1950s to the 1970s, many popular paintings depicting Mami Wata (also known in the eastern DRC as “Mamba Muntu,” or “crocodile person”) filled the homes of urban Congolese seeking wealth in a world set in motion by colonial modernization.

31 Shula (active mid-1990s–present, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Quand la sirène s’amuse (When the Siren Amuses Herself), 2002
Acrylic on canvas; 88.9cm x 81.3cm (35" x 32")
Private collection; L2007.13.2
This very modern version of Mami Wata paints her Web address on her portrait.

AFRICAN ATLANTIC

Sacred waters bathe the histories of African peoples, sometimes as tears of deep sorrow, sometimes as drops of soothing and cooling liquid sustaining life and hope. Water connects—world with otherworld, life with afterlife—for many African and African Atlantic peoples—Yoruba, Kongo, Fon, and others. And among Africans dispersed across vast oceans, those waters are emblematic of the ultimate journey back home to all those distant yet living ancestors. In Haiti, it is the journey home to Guinee, across the rippling *kalunga* boundary of existence, imagined as a vast expanse of water, between life and afterlife. This is the abode of Mami Wata, Simbi, Olokun, Yemoja, La Baleine, La Sirene, Watramama, Maman d'Eau, River Maids, and all the water divinities of Africa and the African Atlantic. Their names are regularly invoked to maintain, refresh, and strengthen the spirit needed to endure the hardships and challenges of lives scattered and shattered by the avarice, arrogance, and brutality of those who would enslave others for their own benefit.



HAITI

The Haitian religion of Vodou may be very roughly characterized as moving back and forth between cool and restrained (Rada) aspects and hot and energetic (Petwo) characteristics. Water enters the Vodou cosmology in many forms and via many paths. Marine spirits can be contacted through bodies of water ranging from the sea to the tubs found in Vodou temples. Fish, whales, and snakes, particularly the rainbow python Danbala, join fantastic composite creatures, such as the mermaid Lasirèn, to symbolize the spirits, or *lwa*, of the water. Some water spirits are associated with the cool and sweet Rada divinities; others are Petwo, hot and volatile. Some, like Lasirèn, switch back and forth as they please (Figs. 32–35).

(clockwise from top left)

32 Yves Telemark/Telemak (b. 1955, Port-au-Prince, Haiti)

La femme du Dambalah (Wife of Danbala), 2000
Satin, sequins; 104cm (41")
Private collection; L2007.58.1

The fusion of two spiritual entities (*lwa*) is dramatically portrayed in this flag by artist Yves Telemark. As indicated by the title of the work, Lasirèn, who clearly resembles Mami Wata of the German chromolithograph, is now cast in the role of the wife of Danbala, the rainbow python who came to Haiti with enslaved Fon, Ewe and other African peoples.

33 Evelyn Alcide (b. 1969, Port-au-Prince, Haiti)

Mariage Agoueh LaSirene (The Marriage of Agwe and Lasirèn), 2006

Satin, beads; 140cm (55")
Private collection; L2007.58.3

The lavish wedding of Lasirèn and Agwe, the *lwa*, or spirit, of saltwater, is depicted in a finely detailed flag by Evelyn Alcide. The pink fish tail of Lasirèn gives away her aquatic identity. "Admiral Agwe" wears his military uniform replete with fanciful "joker" boots. A wedding feast is laid out on a table at the edge of the sea. It includes a layered wedding cake topped with a plastic bride and groom and delicacies including cooked fish.

34 Gabriel Bien-Aimé (b. 1951, Croix-des-Bouquets, Haiti)

Lasirèn, circa 1997
Iron; 58.4cm (23")

Collection of Phyllis Galembo; L2007.17.1

The sculptor Gabriel Bien-Aimé has created a wonderfully fluid homage to Lasirèn in this sculpture. The sinuous mermaid floats in a bubble surrounded by her swimming minions.

35 Pierrot Barra (1942–1999, Bel Air district, Port-au-Prince, Haiti)

Santa Marta with Hot Snake Spirit on Their Mountain, 1993

Wood, satin, plastic, sequins, beads, pins, metallic ribbon, lace; 105cm

Fowler Museum; X94.76.3; Museum Purchase

Haitian artist Pierrot Barra created this *reposwa* (object containing a *lwa*) for Santa Marta la Dominadora, whom Haitians call La Reine Kongo (The Kongo Queen). Barra believed that Santa Marta's snake was even more powerful than the *lwa* Danbala Flambeau, whose force was as hot as a lit torch (*flambeau*). Santa Marta's icon is based on the 19th century chromolithograph of the snake charmer who became the face of Mami Wata in Africa.

BRAZIL

Every February 2, along the Northeast coast of Brazil that reaches out toward Africa, descendants of those enslaved, as well as many others, turn their eyes and thoughts toward the vast watery horizon and pray to the "Queen of the Sea," "Mother-Water," the "Mother-of-Fish," Yemanjá, seeking her love, support, protection, and guidance. People come from all parts of Brazil and every corner of the world to pray for good fortune in the coming year and to give offerings to Yemanjá at her principal shrine in Bahia, Brazil near the mouth of the Rio Vermelho (Fig. 36). On the eve of Yemanjá's festival, her sweet-water sister Oxum is also honored with offerings at her sacred lake. This is a time for renewal. Families and friends, devotees and tourists come bearing gifts—bouquets of flowers, perfume, sweet fruits, soft drinks, candies, talcum powder, soaps, beads, mirrors, dolls, candles, and many other items to please the goddess. These offerings are loaded into large woven baskets, placed in boats, and carried out to sea to be given to Yemanjá. When she has accepted them—her sign of blessing—the party begins with singing, dancing, and drinking into the night and next morning, when the sun's first rays sparkle on Yemanjá's waves.



36 Ensemble for a Yemanjá priestess (*mae de santo*)

Bahia, Brazil,
Cloth, metal, beads

Fowler Museum X83.536a-c, Museum Purchase; X83.542c, X83.561a-c, Gift of Dr. Mikelle Smith-Omari; X83.564, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Seymour E. Bird; X82.1358b, Gift of Mrs. W. Thomas Davis

The ensemble of a Yemanjá priestess from Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, is saturated with the colors of the "Queen of the Sea": white for the foam and shades of blue to mark the varying depths of her watery domain.

MAMI WATA AS ARTISTS' MUSE

In addition to their continually transforming histories of influence in Africa and its diasporas, Mami Wata and other African and African Atlantic water spirits have gained an even wider audience, as well as new meanings and import, by capturing the imaginations of a number of contemporary artists—women and men from Africa, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean—who have found in Mami Wata and her cohorts a highly intriguing subject matter. Even though they may not worship her, Mami Wata has entered the dreams and waking hours of these artists, seducing them into creating extraordinary works that open our eyes, minds, and imaginations to wonderful possibilities (Cover, Figs. 37–41). The unique understandings and involvements of contemporary artists with water spirits also allow them to employ Mami Wata and other underwater denizens to address issues of gender, race, morality, identity, economics, politics, and the environment.



37 Alison Saar (b. 1956, Los Angeles, California)

La Pitonisa, 1987

Wood, copper, tin; 167.6cm (66")

Collection of Justine I. Linforth; L2000.25.1

Alison Saar loves to play with the idea of transformation, turning old, abused, and discarded materials into inspiring art alive with new meaning. For her, Mami Wata is "a bridge between past, present, and future." She is as ancient and eternal as the oceans yet as modern and fashionable as a Nigerian "Cash Madam." The title of this work is a name invented by the artist to suggest a "pythoness," a woman dancing with snakes, not just charming them. Guided by two water guardians, Yemaya and Mami Wata, and by the fiery powers of Ogun—since she employs iron and other metals—Saar creates works evoking the cleansing, cooling power of water as well as the purifying power of fire and the forge.

38 Sonya Y. Clark (b. 1967, Washington, D.C.)

Aqua Allure, 2005

Thread, combs, holographic paper, foam-core board; 208.3cm (82")

Collection of the Artist; L2007.24.1a

A sparkling surface of plastic combs on holographic paper evokes, in the words of the artist Sonya Clark, "the reflective quality of water, the dramatic luminescence of underwater life, and the narcissism of Mami Wata." The combs, placed to mirror each other, as well as the threads woven into the combs, repeatedly spell out the water spirit's initials—MWMWMWMWMW—drawing us to the seductive beauty of water as we hear in our minds the hypnotic sound of the siren serenade, MamiWataMamiWataMamiWata.

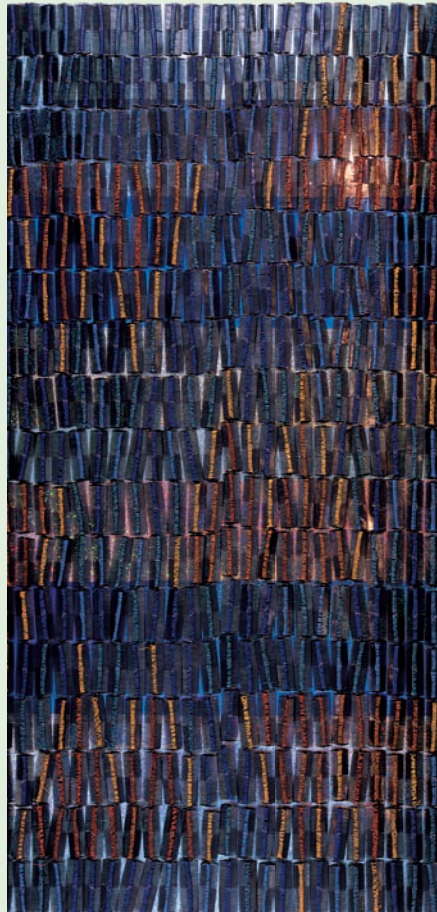
39 Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932, Agbara-Otor, Niger River Delta, Nigeria)

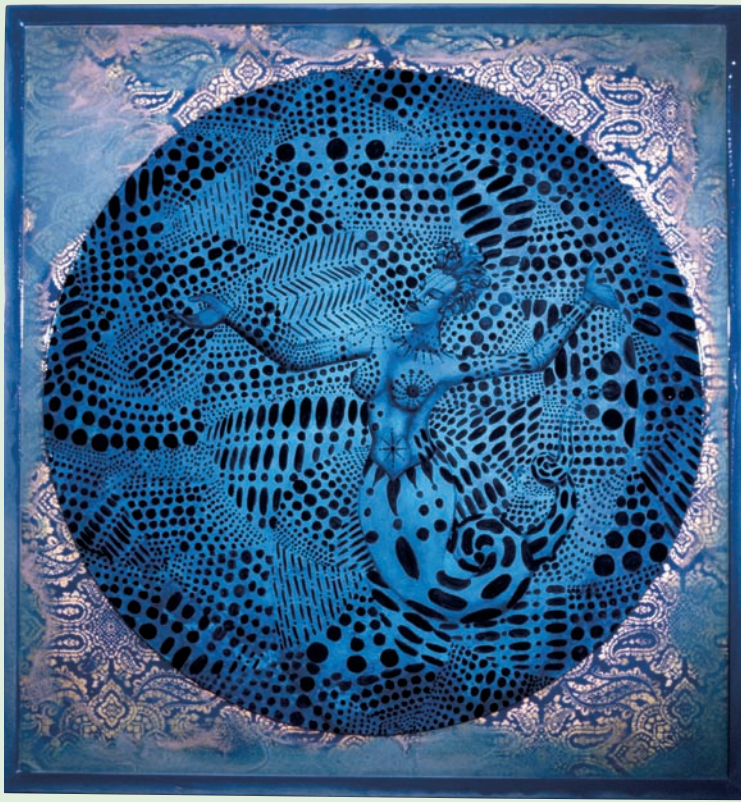
The Hydras Head, 1980

Deep etching on paper; 52.3cm (20½")

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 91-11-1; Gift of Warren M. Robbins

Also known as *Izobo* (Sacrifice), this etching in one of several works featuring Mami Wata that Onobrakpeya has produced over his long career. The Hydra of Grecian mythology reminded the artist of the snake companions of Mami Wata, as well as her own potential for both positive and negative actions. It also reminded him of Mami's voluminous wavy hair, which is often rendered as long, serpentine braids. For Onobrakpeya, the multiheaded monster he depicts represents the countless economic, social, religious, and political challenges that the newly independent nation of Nigeria has had to face.





40 Edouard Duval-Carrié (b. 1954, Haiti; active Miami Beach, Florida)

Aida Wedo, 2004

Mixed media in artist's frame; 127cm (50")

Collection of David Wallack

A deep, cool blue circle holds mysterious and unknowable spiritual entities from Africa. These spirits are venerated in Haitian Vodou and known as *Iwa*. Ezili, goddess of love and passion, is fused with the celestial rainbow serpent, *Ayida Wedo*. She floats in a droplet of water, yet opens her arms to embrace the whole world. Her snake tail curls and spirals until it almost disappears into the optical maze of dots and dashes that refer to the Vodou tradition of *pwen*—points of light and mystic energy that signal the presence of extraordinary powers. These points of light and energy bejewel *Ayida Wedo/Ezili*, creating an exquisite corporeal art that merges with and emerges from the "haze" that surrounds these barely glimpsed mysteries, *les mystères*.

41 Nancy Josephson (b. 1955, New Jersey; active New York, New York)

La Siren, 1999

Sequins, beads, rhinestones, mannequin; 228.6cm (90")

Private collection; L2007.20.1

Attracted to Haiti's arts, materials, and ways of working, Nancy Josephson was "yanked into the spiritual path that is Vodou It made total sense to me that the spirits would take me as I am, with nothing left out." She reflects, "I call on *La Siren* to help me flow.... I'm a [New] Jersey girl. I think there's something in the water there that made my cylinders rev at a higher speed than sometimes is necessary. I'm sure *La Siren* chose me because of this. She cools me down. My work centers on my appreciation of the blessings I have been given and the knowledge I receive as I go forward. The power in the work is an offering to the spirits who help me negotiate the weird and wonderful."



ENVOI

Like the unfathomable depths of the world's oceans, the imag(in)ing of *Mami Wata* and other water deities in Africa and its Diasporas appears limitless. Over a five-hundred-year period, *Mami* has surfaced in the guise of a mermaid, snake charmer, Hindu god or goddess, and African-Catholic saint, as well as other intriguing and magical characters. She has seduced and charmed many, who have given visible form to this spiritual entity as an integral part of the process of self-definition, self-realization, and empowerment in countless cultural worlds over time and space. Where, when, and in what form she will next swim into our mind's eye remains anyone's guess.

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Notes

This exhibition preview is based on the exhibition catalogue. My sincere thanks to all my colleagues and the entire staff of the Fowler Museum at UCLA for their collaboration in this project.

1 A second Sapi ivory saltcellar from Newcastle-on-Tyne on loan to the British Museum depicts "semi-nude female figs with fish tails" (Fraser 1972:275–6).

2 Crocodiles are prominent in stories of Sowo women among the Temne, Bullom, and Baga: "A Bundu woman plays tricks with crocodiles. A strong and fearless swimmer, she dives amidst the reptiles and stirs them from sleep, calling to them as she flirts the water into their eyes, making them follow her as she swims rapidly away" (Lamp 1985:34, citing nineteenth and early twentieth-century sources, Butt-Thompson and Blyden). The first Europeans to arrive in Africa were the Portuguese, who in 1462 made contact with the Sapi people on Sherbro Island off the coast of present-day Sierra Leone. Establishing trading, they commissioned the sophisticated stone and ivory Sapi sculptors to create saltcellars, pyxes (Christian liturgical vessels), spoons, fork and knife handles and oliphants (hunting horns) based on European models, probably consisting of prints, drawings, or book illustrations (Bassani and Fagg 1988:111).

3 One Mami Wata priestess (Hunter-Hindrew 2004) believes her ancient origins are in Mesopotamia and Egypt. One writer (Paxon 1983) has suggested an origin among Africans in the New World and a return to Africa. Several scholars theorize that Mami Wata is a colonial-era invention (Coote and Salmons forthcoming).

4 Historical evidence of a pidgin Dutch name for Mami Wata in the African Atlantic world comes from Surinam in the eighteenth century (1775) with discussions of Watra Mama dances feared by whites, something that may have been introduced by Papa/Popo Africans (Ewe-Mina, coast of Republic of Benin) who came in large numbers between circa 1675 and 1775; see van Stripriaan forthcoming.

5 One African aquatic creature, the manatee—a mammal that suckles its young—may have also fostered ideas about mermaids and wealth from the sea. See Borgatti forthcoming for a discussion of *achikobo* among the Okpella, although the name (*achi* = horse, *kobo* = coin money/penny) suggests the colonial era. Holas (1952:426–27) notes another widely dispersed tradition that seems to bridge ancient indigenous aquatic spirits possibly derived from manatee lore with Mami Wata. He discusses and illustrates wall paintings depicting "Mami Ouata" (a variant of Liberian pidgin English). She is shown with her hair parted in the middle, a fish body and tail, two human legs, and high-heeled shoes on her feet. Holas says that Mami Ouata is widely dispersed all along the coast among the Putu and Tchien peoples (Liberia) as well as the Dida, Ebrie, Avikam, and Godie peoples in Côte d'Ivoire.

6 The Portuguese male figure grasps an object in his right hand. His closed fist with projecting thumb may allude to the "gathering up of riches" that the people of Benin link with both the Portuguese and Olokun, god of the sea, creativity, and wealth (Cole 1989:143). It may be significant that the popular snake charmer image of Mami Wata, showing her left hand clenched in a fist with projecting thumb, may have been understood by Benin observers as evidence of her "gathering up of riches."

7 By the end of the eighteenth century and with the development of Romanticism, exoticism became a theme of growing importance in the arts and in culture. Romanticism, with its focus centered on "any time but now, and any place but here" (cf. Fleming 1980:376) sought its inspiration in the past, in nature, and in the exotic. The exotic included almost everywhere beyond a narrowly defined Western Europe. Orientalism meant not only

the distant lands of Asia, but the Mediterranean (North Africa and the Near East) and Eastern Europe (Russia) as well. It was a time when trade goods from around the world were entering European markets and missionaries set out to spread Christian doctrine. The arts reflected this new fascination and tapped the growing popular interest in the "other." In 1749, Jean-Georges Noverre choreographed *Les fêtes chinoises* in Paris. As early as 1759, Arthur Murphy presented a play called *The Orphan of China*. Gluck wrote the opera *Pilgrims to Mecca* (1764), and Mozart's music was set in a Turkish harem in 1785 (Fleming 1980:379–80). Kew Gardens in London had rococo pavilions, Greek temples, Gothic chapels, a Muslim mosque, a Moorish palace, and a house of Confucius (ibid., p. 380). At Brighton between 1815 and 1821, John Nash built an "Arabian Nights extravaganza" for the Prince Regent in a style called "Indian Gothic," a cluster of minarets, cupolas, pinnacles, and pagodas with an interior filled with Oriental lacquerware, Chinese Chipendale, and painted dragons (ibid., p. 381).

8 The story of Maladamatjaute is a fascinating one that will be treated in a future work. I summarize some of the key aspects of her life here. It seems that Breitwieser did much of his "hunting" in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and it seems likely that Maladamatjaute came from that part of the world, possibly from Samoa or Borneo. Soon after she arrived in Hamburg with Breitwieser, about 1880, she began to perform as a snake charmer in one of Hagenbeck's shows. She may have been taught by Breitwieser, who went by the nickname "snake gripper" (Wilhelm Zimmermann, personal communication, 1984). Within a short time she had become an international attraction, performing in the United States about 1885. A circus newspaper/courier shows her in a small fenced area surrounded by many snakes and holding aloft two large snakes above her head, while another wraps around her body. Her full head of hair flares outward, parted in the middle, and her name has changed to "Nala Damajanti—the Empress of the Reptile World—the Greatest and Most Astounding snake charmer of Hindoostan—the bravest of the brave—Python sorceress of mighty power." She wears a tight bodice, armbands, necklace, and hoop earrings. This was published in Philadelphia in 1885 in a newspaper-like format as an advertisement for the circus. Maladamatjaute must have traveled widely since she appears in a Folies Bergère poster under the name of "Nala Damajanti—Charmeuse Hindoue," circa 1890 (affiche 480, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris). According to Hagenbeck (1908 [1925]:171–2), she also performed for many years in the Adam Forepaugh Circus in the United States. Wilhelm Zimmermann related (personal communication, 1984) that Hagenbeck combined with the Willis circus to put on a big show in the United States about 1900, but we know that he was also involved with the Columbian World Exposition and World's Fair at Chicago as early as 1893, for he donated some objects to the Field Museum of Natural History. The studio photograph of Maladamatjaute taken in Hamburg is said to date to around 1887, but it may be earlier. I found it in the very last folder of the private circus archive of Wilhelm Zimmermann, near Hamburg. She is also photographed in a book about Hagenbeck by Guenter Niemeyer (1972:278). As her fame grew, she continued to perform internationally in Europe and the United States under slightly different stage names. Despite this, the representations of her thick, full head of black wavy hair parted in the middle, and elements of her "Hindoo/Oriental" dress—jewelry, necklace, tight bodice, and hoop earrings—remain constant. She and Breitwieser were married for a long time. He lived to 94 and died around 1930 (Zimmermann, personal communication, 1984). This is as far as I have been able to go. I am currently searching for more news of Maladamat-

jaute, alias Mami Wata.

9 My sincere thanks to Wilhelm Zimmermann and his Circus Archive for valuable information and permission to publish this photograph. The information that came with the photograph was "Maladamatjaute ca. 1887 im circus C. Hagenbeck spetere Frau Breitwieser."

10 My thanks to Ruth Malhotra for much information on the Freidlander posters and permission to illustrate one of the posters. She noted that some of the early examples in the 1880s were numbered—perhaps the "#4" at the bottom of the 1955 Bombay edition was copied from the original. The style of the work is very similar to that of Christian Bettels, the chief lithographer and one of the few artists working for Freidlander who signed his work (Ruth Malhotra, personal communication, 1980).

11 A nineteenth-century photograph of the Kauffman Traders shop in Caracas, Venezuela, circa 1894, shows two men surrounded by walls covered in framed paintings, photographs, and prints of a variety of subjects, but mostly women in sedate "pinups" (Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte Bildarchiv). The same could have occurred in Africa. Two major Hamburg companies (Woermann and Brigg) were doing business in Liberia, Dahomey (present-day Benin), and Lagos by the mid-nineteenth century. See also Anderson and Peek 2002:62, figs. A3, A4 for nineteenth-century views of a trader's quarters in New Calabar and a warehouse in the Niger Delta—with many pictures, prints, and photographs on the walls.

12 Joseph Adande, personal communication, 2007.

13 Ekpon, personal communication, 2004.

14 Njoku, personal communication, May 1978.

15 M. Opara, personal communication, October 4, 1975.

12 I found this image buried in a folder of random photographs in the archive, along with others by Green, a Bonny photographer who documented many aspects of life in the Delta, including the presence of Europeans. Many of his photographs are in the Unilever PLC archives. Martha G. Anderson, Lisa Aronson, Christraud M. Geary, and E.J. Alagoa are presently conducting research on J.A. Green with the support of a Getty Collaborative Research Grant. The project includes archival research in the United States and Great Britain as well as fieldwork in Nigeria. They plan to organize an exhibition of the late photographer's work.

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