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# Performing the Other

## Mami Wata Worship in Africa

*Henry John Drewal*

In their religious practices involving the water spirit Mami Wata, African peoples from Senegal to Tanzania take exotic images and ideas, interpret them according to indigenous precepts, invest them with new meanings, and then re-create and re-present them in new and dynamic ways to serve their own aesthetic, devotional, and social needs. In so doing, they evaluate and transform external forces, using them to shape their own lives.<sup>1</sup>

The Mami Wata phenomenon illustrates what Roy Wagner (1981) calls the invention of culture, an ongoing process of creating one's reality, of constructing meaning out of experience. Such invention never occurs in a vacuum or by accident, but rather emerges out of what already exists. Like anthropologists, Mami Wata devotees "study" others—overseas visitors—and generalize them from impressions, experiences, and other evidence as if they were produced by some external "thing." This invention is an objectification, or reification, of that "thing" (Wagner 1981:26). Their study of our "ways"—our lore, writings, possessions, or patterns of worship—is actually a resymbolization of them, transforming our symbols into theirs (Wagner 1981:30). This study is my own objectification of the process by which Mami Wata devotees invent foreigners from overseas as models for an evolving system of beliefs and practices in honor of water spirits. That process is at the same time one of self-definition for Mami Wata devotees, achieved in large part through performance.

Mami Wata, Pidgin English for "Mother of Water," refers to an African water spirit whom Africans regard as foreign in origin. Africans use the pidgin term to acknowledge the spirit's otherness as well as to indicate its incorporation into the African world. The term mediates between Africans and those from overseas and represents Africans' attempts at understanding or constructing meaning from their encounters with overseas strangers. Pidgin English also serves as a lingua franca among Africans. Sharing similar kinds of experiences with foreigners and foreign material culture, Africans spread Mami Wata lore throughout West and Central Africa and filter it through many cultural lenses to make it a transcultural phenomenon of remarkable proportions.

The pidgin term suggests an economic context; such languages develop during periods of expanding trade. The arrival of Europeans and the trad-

ing wealth they brought reinforced ancient African ideas of wealth from the sea in the form of coral and cowries. It is therefore most appropriate that a trading language be used to name a spirit whose primary gift to her devotees is wealth, especially monetary riches from abroad.

But in important ways Mami Wata is not a pidgin phenomenon. For one thing, Mami Wata worshipers are not formulating beliefs and practices for the consumption of foreigners. Therefore, the term is not mediative in this sense. Secondly, rather than becoming a reductionistic and simplified version of a particular code, Mami Wata is a varied, complex, and fully expressive system that has drawn inspiration from widely dispersed and diverse sources to forge a uniquely African faith.

What can account for Mami Wata's presence among so many different peoples over such a vast area of Africa? Certainly their shared experiences with Europeans is crucial. Mami Wata represents a "free," unencumbered spirit of nature detached from any social bonds. She is broadly identified with Europeans, rather than with any specific African ethnic group. Although her name "Mami," sometimes spelled Mammy, is usually translated as "mother," she has no children, no family of any kind—she is entirely outside any social system. Her appellation of "mother" connotes her sexual identity, her domination over the realm of water, and those who come under her sway. Her relationship with her devotees is more as a lover than as a parent (Gerrits 1983). In Ghana, she is notorious for her jealousy. She is said either to drive a man's wives out of the house or to kill them. In Zaire, she demands total sexual abstinence in return for riches—profit in exchange for progeny (Fabian 1978:319). Likewise, the benefit she brings—monetary wealth—is acquired rather than inherited and is therefore outside the kinship system. As a foreigner, she provides alternatives to established cultural avenues. Her otherness and her independence together legitimize novel modes of action.

Building on indigenous beliefs in water spirits, often represented as aquatic creatures such as fish, crocodiles, and water snakes, Africans incorporated new spirits, such as the mermaid, when Europeans arrived along the coast in the late 15th century (plate 1). The earliest documented example of an African rendering of a mermaid juxtaposes her with crocodiles. The image occurs in an Afro-Portuguese ivory from Sherbro, Sierra Leone, known to have been in Denmark before 1743 (Fraser 1972:277). Early European travelers reported that Africans associated them with the sea and water spirits, an impression that would have been reinforced by the sight of their large sailing vessels coming into view from below the horizon. One of the earliest European interpretations of African ideas about Europeans was made by Cadamosto, who voyaged to the western coast of Africa near Cape Verde in the years 1455 and 1456 (see Crone 1937:20–21). In 1700, during a voyage to the islands of Bissao and Bissagos, the Frenchman Andre Brue reported an "Odd Ceremony of sacrificing a Cock":

[A] canoa approached with five Negros; one of whom came on Deck, holding a Cock in his left Hand, and a Knife in his right. After kneeling a Minute before the Sieur Brue, without speaking, he rose; and turning to the East, cut the Cock's Throat, and placing himself on his Knees again, let some Drops of Blood fall on the Sieur Brue's Feet. He did the same to the Mast and Pump of the Ship, and returning to the General, presented him the Cock. The General, ordering him a Bumper of Brandy, asked him the Reasons of this Ceremony:



1. A mural by an Ewe artist painted on the exterior wall of a Mami Wata shrine. This central panel depicts the rainbow and Mami Wata as a mermaid gazing into her mirror while combing her long hair. Her snake companion, in this area associated with the rainbow, looks on. The two flanking panels are based on Indian popular prints of Hindu spirits. Ghana, Ewe, 1975. (Photo by Henry J. Drewel)

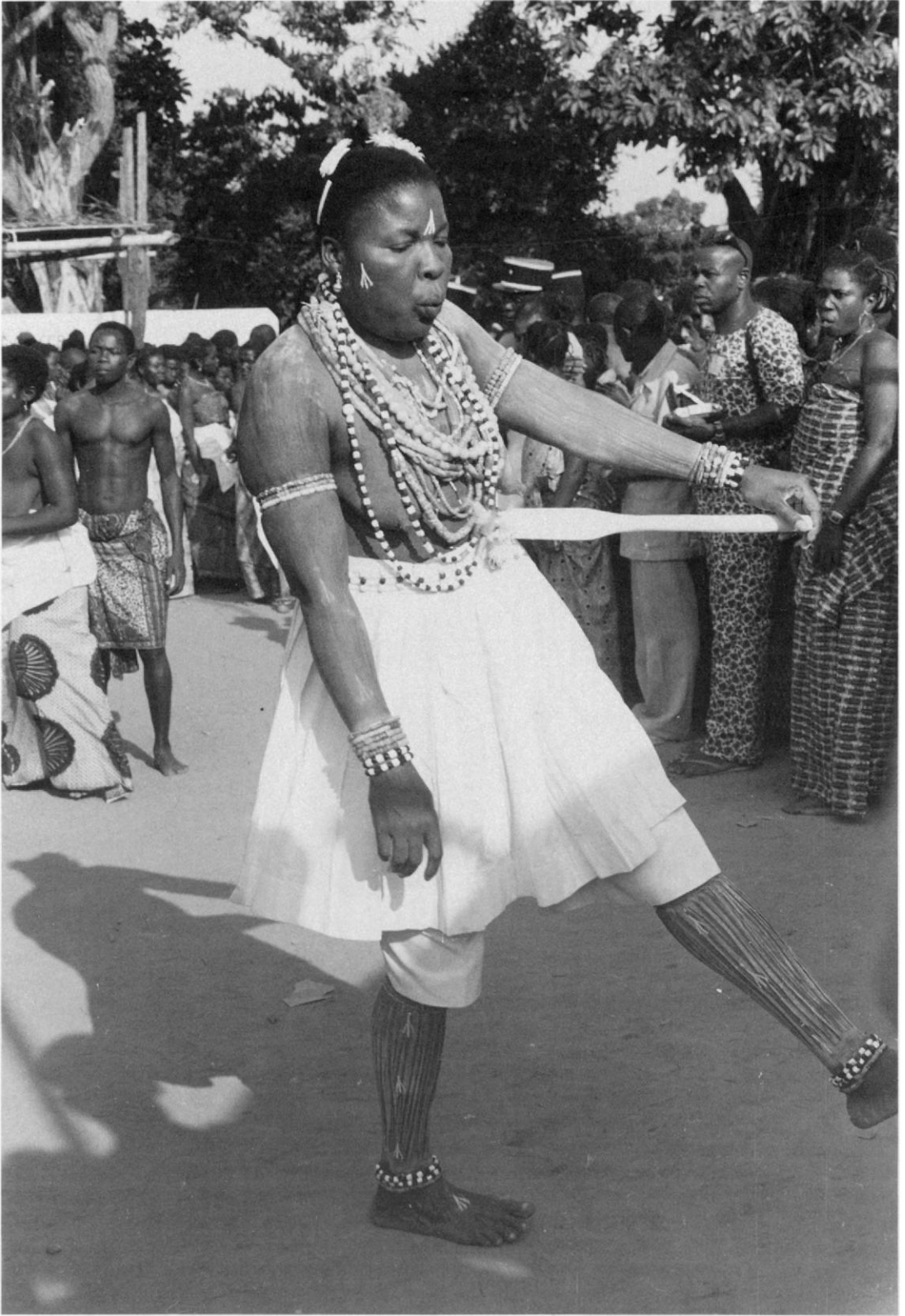
2. A Mami Wata medium—a trident paddle on her hip, lines, and tridents painted on her body with powdered white clay, and rainbow serpent beads hung around her neck—leans in an off-balance pose during trance before beginning her dance. Togo, Mina, 1975. (Photo by Henry J. Drewel)

He replied, that the People of his Country looked on the Whites as the Gods of the Sea; that the mast was a Divinity that made the Ship walk, and the Pump was a Miracle, since it could make Water rise-up, whose natural Property is to descend (in Astley 1968:104–5).

Other authors have documented similar responses.<sup>2</sup>

These curious-looking white visitors, their possessions, and especially their icons made a profound impression. De Barros' 15th-century accounts describing some Abyssinians reported that “they bowed down and adored the figurehead of the Portuguese flagship—a wooden statuette of the Angel Gabriel” (in Jayne 1970:47). Marine sculptures (especially figureheads of females) became part of water divinity altars at least as early as the 19th century. One figurehead that came from a ship wrecked off the coast of southern Africa in the 1870s was allegedly acquired by Africans and incorporated into a shrine honoring local sea divinities (Pinckney 1940:27, 130). Similarly among the Bidjogo on the West African coast, a Baroque style figurehead dominated a shrine on Formosa Island (Bernatzig 1933:plate 221).

As a result of their increasing awareness of European lore and imagery, Africans adapted the concept of the mermaid, whose most characteristic depictions show her emerging from the water combing her long luxurious hair as she gazes at her reflection in a mirror (plate 1). The mirror has become central to Mami Wata belief and ritual practice. Familiar with mermaid lore, devotees consider the mirror one of Mami Wata's most prized possessions. The mirror's surface is like the surface of the water. It is the boundary between the cosmic realms of water and land, a symbol of the permeable threshold crossed by Mami Wata when she enters the bodies of her mediums and they go into possession trance (plate 2). At the same





time, it is the threshold crossed by those troubled by Mami Wata when they voyage to her watery underworld in their dreams. Furthermore, the mirror allows not only passage between water and land, but between the present and the future. As one Ewe devotee in Togo explained about her Mami Wata mirror, “I can see the future in it; the mirror can answer my questions. It does so at night during my dreams” (in Chesi 1980:57).

At another level, the mirror is a metaphor for the very process by which devotees construct their worship and ritual performance. In their effort to become one with Mami Wata, devotees re-create her world by mirroring data from a variety of sources—popular imported prints, dreams, foreign literature, trade goods, and the actions of those from overseas (Europeans and Indians). Yet this mirroring is not simple reproduction; it is a creative interpretation and re-presentation of the things they see and experience. Using exotic sources as models for behavior, devotees create Mami Wata’s attire, construct her watery world in their sacred spaces, and impersonate her during rituals, frequently going into possession trance.

As an important part of the mermaid’s image, the mirror symbolizes the alluring beauty and vanity of this irresistible creature. Sitting on a rock and combing her luxurious long hair as she admires herself in the mirror, the mermaid can lure the unwary or unprepared to their destruction or, under other circumstances, can bestow enormous wealth.<sup>3</sup>

Mirrors figure prominently in devotees’ communications with the spirit. One Igbo priestess explained that mirrors are used to “call” Mami Wata to possess her mediums. Because of her vanity Mami Wata enjoys looking at herself, and mirrors are thought to attract her to the site when devotees seek her presence, or to distract her when she “worries” them excessively. Thus, mirrors adorn Mami Wata shrines. In one Igbo shrine in Nigeria (plate 3), the reflective surfaces of the mirrors held by a Mami Wata figure echo the pool of water that she stands in and the sunglasses that she wears. As the priest of this altar explained, Mami Wata wears sunglasses because “she is a fashionable lady”—a comment totally in accord with popular images of mermaids. But sunglasses are more than expressions of fashion. They, like mirrors, represent the surface of the water, the threshold that separates as well as unites Mami Wata and her devotees.

For many Mami Wata followers, communications with the spirit are seen as cosmic journeys. Initially, Mami Wata makes her presence felt through vivid dreams and visions that continually “worry” the chosen person. One Mina priest in Togo explained how his world began to fall apart and “whirl around him,” turning everything “upside down.” He lost all sense of direction or purpose in life, until he learned through divination that Mami Wata was causing his troubles and that he must worship her to set things right.

Often, people’s first encounters with Mami Wata are in visions of seascapes. An Ewe priestess at Lome, Togo, was first drawn to the seaside in her dreams. She described how, instead of going to school as a child, she would go to the beach and remain there for hours, gazing into the water. When her father learned of her “unnatural” behavior, he punished her. Soon afterward she became seriously ill. The following day she went down to the sea again and this time went in, feeling compelled to cover herself in water. Some fishermen rescued her. After this incident, her father took her to a priest, who divined her identity as a chosen of Mami Wata. She was later initiated into the Mami Wata priesthood.

In dreams, Mami Wata told the priestess to collect clay, first from one river, then from another, and also from a third. Then Mami Wata in-

3. *Mirrors and sunglasses adorn an Igbo shrine sculpture of Mami Wata that stands on Coke bottles in a small pool of water. In front, plates, a bottle, a bottle opener, wooden and metal snakes, talcum powder containers, kola nuts, and a candelabrum cluster on a table. Nigeria, Igbo, 1978. (Photo by Henry J. Drewal)*

structed her to go to the sea. When she reached the shore the waters parted, making a road, and she went inside. She came to a door, opened it, and saw Mami Wata, who gestured to her with a sweeping arc over her head. Mami Wata told her to make a clay stool and then a figure of a girl. The priestess made both, but when she saw someone coming to look at what she had made, she tried to chase the intruder away. Then she woke up.

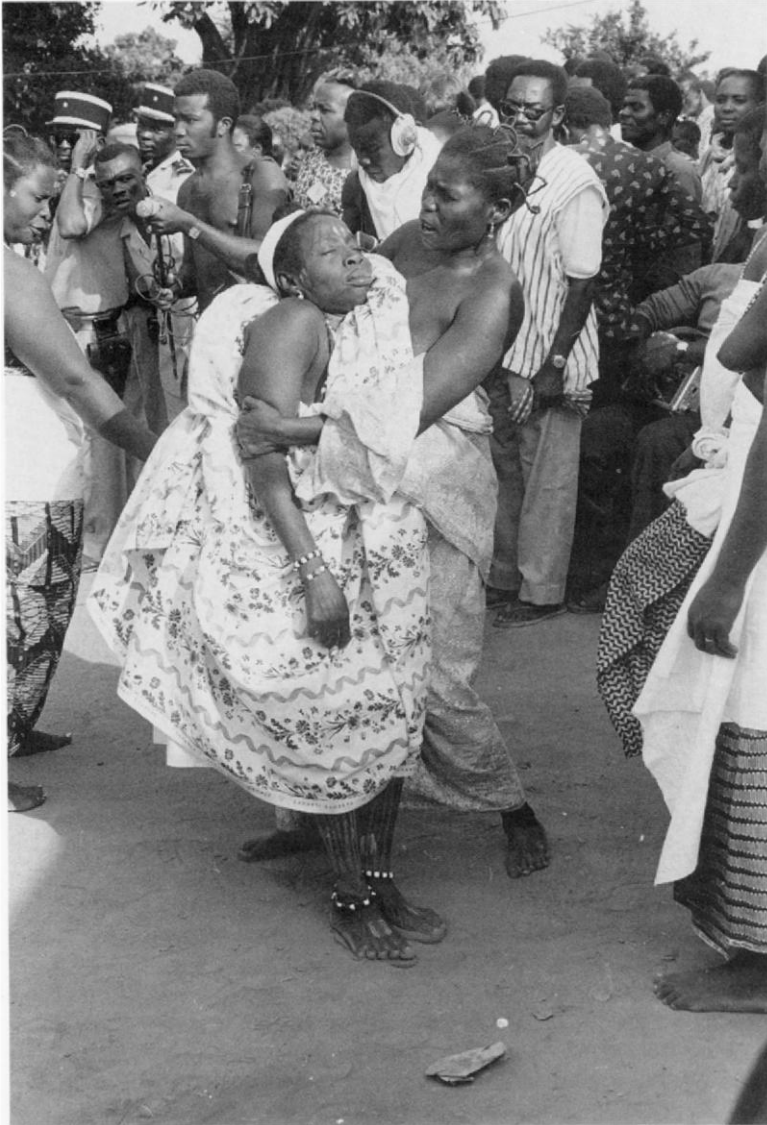
Since that dream, the Ewe priestess has had many others. Mami Wata told her to make clay sculptures of what she sees (plate 4). In another dream, she was told to gather the powerful leaves associated with the deity Dan, the celestial water serpent or rainbow. The very next day, she began to gather them and put them in the statues. She sculpted the leaves onto the shoulders or in the hands of some of her Mami Wata figures, depicting Mami Wata as she had appeared in her dreams—coming out of the water covered with Dan's leaves. The wavy lines in the clay-covered floor of her shrine evoke a beach, rivulets of water, and snakes—all central themes in her visions (plate 4). Thus the priestess interprets and reflects what she sees in her dreams in order to re-present Mami Wata's realm in her own.

Dreams appear to be significant universally in the Mami Wata phenomenon; some of their motifs recur frequently (see Dupre 1978:63; Gerrits 1983:36). Not only do devotees travel to Mami Wata's realm beneath the sea, but Mami Wata herself journeys to the world of her followers, causing



4. Under instructions from Mami Wata through dreams, an Ewe priestess sculpts clay figures of females and males, snakes, and other figures, decorating them with cowrie seashells, tridents, and other items and covering the floor with wavy lines of clay to evoke rivulets and snakes. Togo, Ewe, 1975. (Photo by Henry J. Drewel)



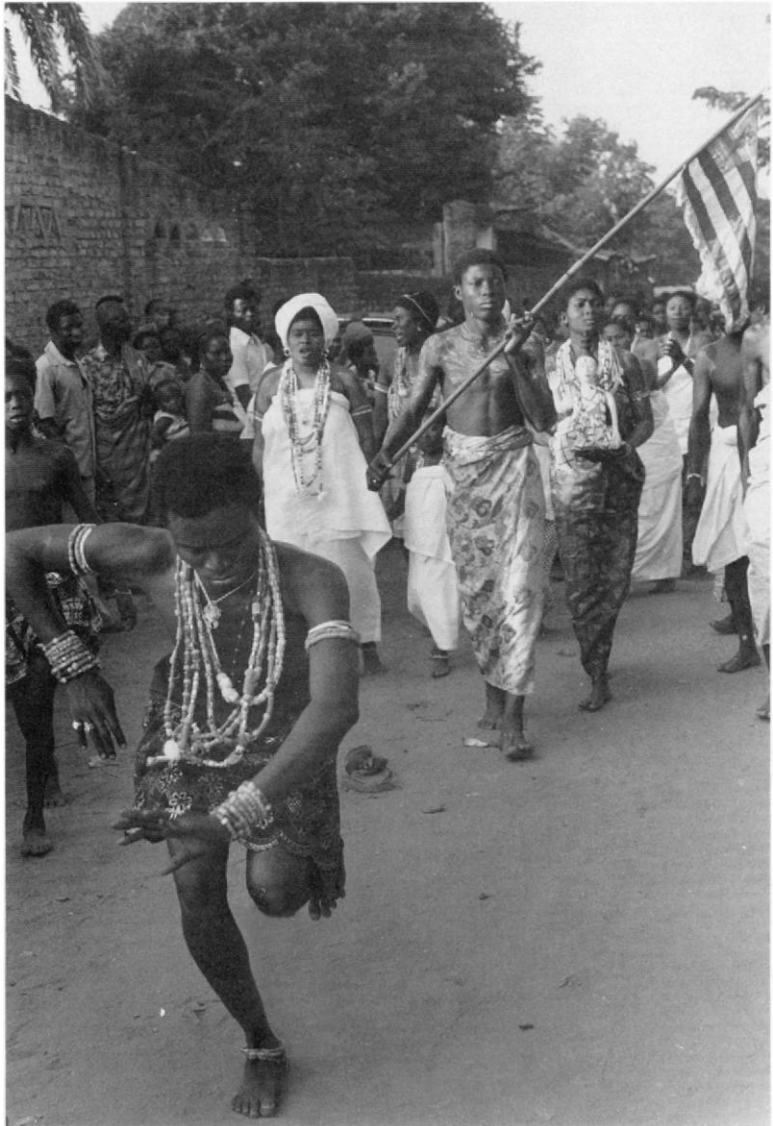


5. A Mami Wata medium going into trance loses consciousness and is caught by an assistant. Togo, Mina, 1975. (Photo by Henry J. Drewal)

them to go into possession trance. Shivers, shouts, and disequilibrium signal the onset of possession (plate 5). At one ceremony in Togo, a priestess swayed and stared blankly into space. Then, posturing with hands on hips, she surveyed the scene and began to walk backward, then forward. Others launched into a song, and the possessed devotee leaned forward in a dance in which the winging arm/shoulder gestures characteristic of Ewe and Mina style were interspersed with large stroking arm gestures that evoked paddling or swimming. Such swimming gestures characterize Mami Wata possession trance in southern Togo (plate 6).

In other instances, Mami Wata manifests herself through ventriloquism.<sup>4</sup> Once, an Igbo Mami Wata priestess informed Margaret Thompson Drewal and me that she had trained for more than seven years in order to “invoke Mami Wata’s voice.” She removed her pink headtie and donned a white one. Then, sitting on a low stool before a shrine covered in

6. In the foreground, a Mami Wata medium employs large, swimming gestures as part of his trance performance while he leads a procession of devotees. Togo, Mina, 1975. (Photo by Margaret Thompson Drewal)



white cloth, she pinched off a small amount of a red claylike substance and sprinkled it on the ground along with perfume from a small bottle. She also put some perfume on her headtie just above her forehead. The priestess rang a small bell as she entered the shrine enclosure and then added the sound of a wooden instrument to the accompaniment. Soon after, she began a song in a mixture of Igbo and English that had a decidedly Christian hymnlike quality (we were told later that Mami Wata was Christian and that she “beat” those who failed to go to church). The small bell was replaced by the loud clang of a large one, followed by the voice of Mami Wata. The ethereal voice that pierced the room seemed to come from another direction. Its quality was otherworldly. Although Mami Wata spoke in some form of English, we were not able to follow; another woman served as translator.

The conversation ran as follows: Mami Wata extended greetings and asked for money to pay for the gas she had used in her journey to come and

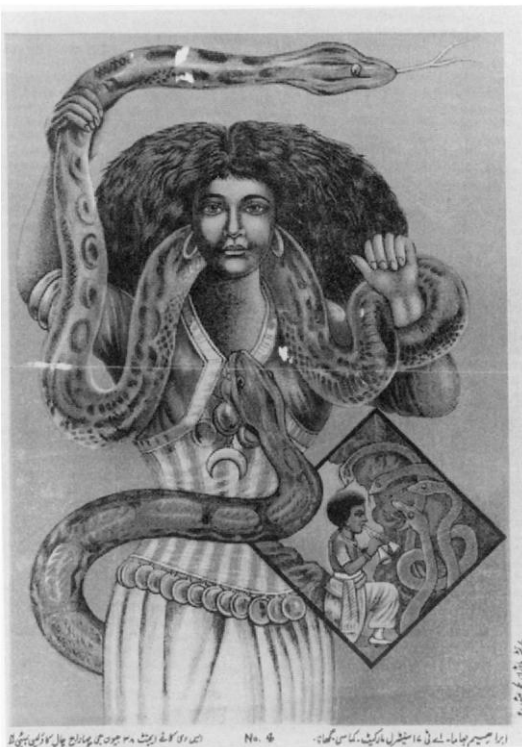
speak—as everyone knows, she drives a car. The amount requested was sizable, because (it was later explained) Mami Wata had traveled all the way from the Indian Ocean where she lived. We said we could not pay such an amount and offered a smaller gift which was accepted. Then Mami Wata asked if we had been “seeing things” on Friday nights for, she said, she had been visiting us. A mark on the body would confirm her presence (earlier we had been told that Mami Wata “marks” her people).<sup>5</sup> Then she asked if we wanted to see her “face to face.” We said yes and the medium’s sister asked, “If you see Mami Wata, won’t you run away?” We answered, no, because we heard that Mami Wata was very beautiful. Mami Wata gave more blessings and asked for further questions. When we asked what she looked like, Mami Wata first said that no one had ever actually seen her, but then directed our attention to a chromolithograph on the wall (plate 7).

After the ventriloquist performance was over, we asked the priestess how she knew that Mami Wata looked like the print, and she replied: “Someone with special powers must have gone under the water to snap her picture.” This and other naturalistic pictures, regarded as photographs, are believed to capture the underwater reality of Mami Wata.

By the second half of the 19th century, the establishment of colonial empires and the expansion of trade linking Africa with both Europe and the East provided the setting for the rapid spread of images and ideas that helped to inspire the diversity of Mami Wata iconography and performances. The most widespread image of Mami Wata is the one the Igbo priestess had hanging in her shrine. It is a chromolithograph of European origin depicting a snake charmer. Dating circa 1885, it was subsequently reprinted in large numbers in India and England and distributed widely in sub-Saharan West and Central Africa where it became the key image of Mami Wata in less than 80 years.<sup>6</sup>

7. *This chromolithograph of a snake charmer is the 1955 edition printed in Bombay, India, by the Shree Ram Calendar Company from a European source. African devotees regard it as a picture or “photograph” of Mami Wata.*

8. *Studio photograph of the snake charmer Maladamat-jaute, ca. 1887. (Photo courtesy of the Wilhelm Zimmermann Circus Archive)*



Remarkably, this image symbolized the exotic Other for two vastly different cultural areas in the world: she was a mysterious, sensuous Oriental snake charmer for Europeans, but a European water spirit for Africans! The origin of this image can be traced to the northern German port of Hamburg in the second half of the 19th century, during an era of widespread public fascination with things from distant lands. Carl G. C. Hagenbeck's 1848 success exhibiting animals as a popular attraction led to a rapidly enlarged menagerie of more exotic animals from Greenland, Africa, and Asia, housed in his zoological garden in Hamburg. Soon he added another attraction—exotic people—creating a new form of popular entertainment, the *Volkschauen* or “People Shows” (Benninghoff-Luhl 1984).

About 1880, when Hagenbeck's game hunter traveled to Southeast Asia and the Pacific to trap animals for the zoo, he returned with a wife (probably Samoan) who began to perform as a snake charmer in Hagenbeck's show under the stage name of “Maladamatjaute.” A photograph of her taken about 1887 in a Hamburg studio shows many elements of the snake charmer chromolithograph (plate 8). Note especially the style and cut of the bodice, the stripes of buttons, the coins about the waist, the armlets, the position of the snake around her neck and a second one nearby, the nonfunctional bifurcated flute (see the inset in the print), and her facial features and coiffure. There can be little doubt that Maladamatjaute was the model for the image called “Der Schlangenbandiger” (The Snake Charmer). It was probably made between 1880–87 by an artist (as yet undetermined) in the printing studios of Hagenbeck's close friend and associate Adolph Friedlander, a leading printer who produced for Hagenbeck a wide variety of circus and “People Show” posters in the style of the snake charmer print (see Malhotra 1979).

Not long after the print's appearance in Europe, the image reached Africa. The earliest evidence of the print's impact in Africa was recorded in a 1901 photograph by J. A. Green taken at Bonny on the Niger River delta (plate 9). It shows an African headdress with a somewhat two-dimensional half-figure that is unquestionably based on the snake charmer print: note the thick, black hair (a wig) parted in the middle; the earrings; the cut of the garment's neckline; the position of the snake and of the figure's arms; and especially the low-relief rendering of the inset showing the kneeling flute player facing several snakes (to the lower right of the central figure). Feather plumes, toy rattles, and a large number of mirrors surround the figure.

The chromolithograph that inspired this Bonny headdress along with the Igbo sculpture in plate 3 has had an extraordinary impact in Africa; its style and iconography help to explain its widespread significance. The snake, an important and widespread African symbol of water and the rainbow (Hambly 1931), is a most appropriate subject to be shown surrounding, protecting, as well as being controlled by the Mother of Water. The snake's position over the head of Mami Wata reinforces its link with the arching rainbow. One stands for the other, as in the central panel of the Ghanaian mural illustrated in plate 1 and in the Ewe priestess's dream image of Mami Wata's sweeping gesture over her head (cited above). In this chromolithograph, snake/water/rainbow divinity is dramatically combined with female/foreigner/mermaid Mami Wata.

Between the 15th and 19th centuries, the majority of overseas foreigners seen by Africans were Western Europeans, followed by Lebanese and Indians. All were associated with commerce, that is, wealth brought from overseas. Therefore, the same cluster of ideas associated with mermaid



9. This 1901 photograph by J.A. Green taken at Bonny on the Niger River delta shows an African masquerade headdress with a sculpture based upon the European chromolithograph of a snake charmer. (Photo courtesy of the Nigerian National Museum, photo archive neg. #106.94.17)

images would have also been associated with this more recent image of a snake charmer, first obtained from Europeans and later from Indians. The naturalism of the print contributed to its acceptance as a picture of a foreign spirit. As a “photograph,” the print is seen as a product of foreign technology—only logical since Mami Wata is everywhere regarded as a foreigner. The snake charmer is thus interpreted as a depiction of a non-African female by her complexion, her facial features, and especially her long, flowing hair—all of which she shares with mermaids. The print, like the image of the mermaid, also epitomizes breathtaking beauty. Without exception, informants emphasized the beauty of Mami Wata’s symmetrical, balanced, intense, and composed face<sup>7</sup>—characteristics that evoke comeliness and well-being. Icons of wealth shown in the print—golden armlets, earrings, neckline, pendant, and waist ornaments—evoke the riches that Mami Wata promises to those who honor her. The theme of wealth that underlies much of Mami Wata worship is sometimes exaggerated by the amount of jewelry (plates 2 & 3).

Since Africans tend to depict complete figures in their visual arts, the half-figure rendering of Mami Wata is taken to be significant by African viewers. In discussing this aspect of the print, devotees point out that Mami Wata in her mermaid manifestation is half woman, half fish; what is not shown becomes important. The concealed lower portion of the snake charmer conveys to devotees that Mami Wata is “hiding her secret,” the fishtail. In the print, the ambiguous rendering of the cloth below the waist, reminiscent of fish scales, reinforces this idea and also recalls the swimming gestures of devotees during trance dances.

The use of an overall blue-green background and the absence of any contextual features, such as landscapes or buildings, contribute to the impression of an underwater scene. This aspect has become important in the creation of Mami Wata environments. In an Igbo shrine, the worshiper recreates Mami Wata’s world by filling the aquamarine-colored space with mirrors, canoe paddles, fishnets, and low-relief snakes floating across the walls (plate 10). Near the center of the raised platform is a coiled, stuffed cloth snake which, in procession, the priestess wraps around her torso, drapes over her shoulders, and holds aloft in her right hand, just as the snake charmer does in the print (Anonymous 1975:72). Also imaging the

10. An aquamarine shrine environment re-creating Mami Wata's underwater world with fishnets, canoe paddles, and a stuffed, coiled snake which the possessed medium wraps around her neck and holds aloft in her right hand in imitation of the snake charmer print. Nigeria, Igbo, 1978. (Photo by Henry J. Drewal)



print, the priestess wears a long black wig parted in the center, a profusion of golden bangles around her neck, and a European-style formal gown trimmed in gold.

The enormous popularity of the snake charmer lithograph led to a growing African market in Indian prints of Hindu deities and spirits over the last 30 years. Africans interpret various Hindu popular prints as a host of Mami Wata spirits associated with specific bodies of water. The expansion of the pantheon and the growing number of Mami Wata devotees in Africa have stimulated a further proliferation of imagery. As a Yoruba man who sells popular Hindu prints in Togo explained:

[F]ormerly, during the colonial period, we had the pictures, but we didn't know their meaning. People just liked them to put in their rooms. But then Africans started to study them too—about what is the meaning of these pictures that they are putting lights, candles, and incense there every time. I think they are using the power to

collect our money away, or how? So we started to befriend the Indians to know their secret about the pictures. From there the Africans also tried to join some of their societies in India and all over the world to know much about the pictures. Reading some of their books, I could understand what they mean.

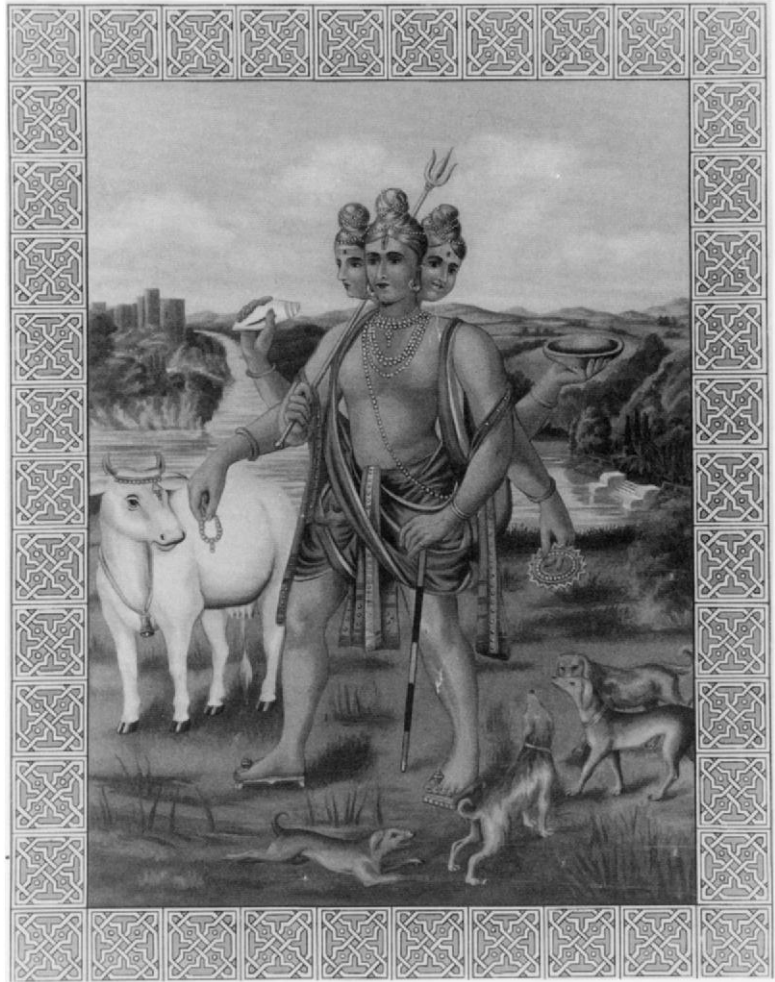
This statement suggests rather explicitly the process of invention, the creation of meaning that is at work as Africans interpret visual and written data from the Other. The print seller distinguished several stages in the process. In the beginning, Africans considered the prints simply as “decoration” until they began to “study” them. When they studied them, or interpreted their iconography, they came to view the prints as religious icons that held secrets to be unlocked. More importantly, Africans determined that there was a direct connection between these Indian images, the beliefs associated with them, and Indians’ success in financial matters (just as mermaids and other icons such as marine sculptures and saints’ statues had been linked with European wealth and power).

But Africans were not content simply to study images, they began to analyze Indian actions as well. They examined Hindu rituals in relation to these religious icons and attributed their own meanings to them. Finally, Africans enlarged the knowledge gained from the images and the actions of Hindus by seeking additional information in their books, pamphlets, and religious paraphernalia. Using all these resources, Mami Wata devotees continue to evolve an elaborate faith, actualizing it in their sacred spaces and ritual performances.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most influential of the new lithographs, printed in India and England, is known in Ghana and Togo as Densu, a male Mami Wata spirit (plate 11). Densu shrines often mirror the themes in the Hindu lithograph (plate 12). On one altar, painted and unpainted shells echo the one in the upper right hand of the Hindu spirit in the print and also reinforce the theme of water. So does the reflective surface of the mirror between the statue’s legs that refers to the surface of the water and to the river shown in the print. Green plastic parrots flank the clay sculpture, referring to the animal companions of Densu. The figure’s three heads, coiffure, and jewelry are copied as well as most of the objects shown in the hands, while the statue itself is painted bright gold to evoke the riches bestowed by Mami Wata.

These and other shrine elements—white cloth, flowers, perfumes, and talcum powder containers—constitute Mami Wata’s “table.” The use of the term “table” is itself revealing, for the table is not traditional in many parts of Africa. Rather it evokes “foreign” ways and is therefore seen as most appropriate for Mami Wata. The icon derives from at least four sources: the dressing table of European ladies, the dining table, the Christian altar, and the altar in Hindu households with its pictures, candles, and incense. The process of making the table seems to have become more elaborate with the advent of an expanded corpus of Hindu prints, as well as the increased availability of printed matter from India (books, pamphlets, sales catalogs) dealing with Hindu religious practice. A Mina priestess explained that the “old” form of Mami Wata was “with the snake,” but about 1955 they began to worship the “new” forms differently, using a table, perfume, candles, fruits, flowers, and books. Plate 13 shows a Mami Wata table that synthesizes the old and the new. A carved representation of the snake charmer print becomes the focal point of a more elaborate “table” with plastic flowers, dolls, and animals; perfume bottles and talc

11. Hindu popular print interpreted as the male Mami Wata spirit known as Densu in Togo and Ghana.



tins; mirrors; a bottle of Gordon's gin; and, front and center, the Bible surmounted by a plastic turtle.

The Yoruba print seller in Togo dramatically illustrates how meanings are constructed and how Mami Wata ritual practices evolve and spread. He uses books on Buddhism, Hinduism, and Occultism as references for his synthesis of foreign and indigenous divinities and the paraphernalia necessary for their worship. When African clients express an interest in particular prints, he informs them about their English, Hindu, and African names; their powers and attributes; as well as the materials required for their worship. Each water spirit, he explains, has its own incense or perfume because Mami Wata likes pleasant scents and the fragrances "drive away evil spirits." He adds that Mami Wata abhors filth and loves beautiful things, so her table must be spotless, well arranged, and covered in white cloth or clean sand. The remaining requirements for the table include flowers, "sweet" foods (such as candy, bananas, oranges, eggs), candles, papers (either a notebook or individual sheets), money, perfume, and talcum powder.

Since about the First World War, when Indian merchants established firms along the west coast, Africans have been observing their ways, espe-





12. A table for the Mami Wata spirit Densu displays a gold-colored clay figure based on the Hindu chromolithograph shown in plate 11. Togo, Ewe, 1975. (Photo by Henry J. Drewal)

13. A synthesis of the old and new style of Mami Wata, this table features a statue based on the snake charmer print; a mirror at its back; plastic dolls, ducks, fish, and flowers; perfume bottles; talcum powder containers; a Gordon's gin bottle; a Christian picture; and a clay tortoise on top of a book. Togo, Ewe, 1975. (Photo by Henry J. Drewal)



cially Hindu devotions. Many of these rituals are based on the practice of Gujeratis, who predominated among Indian merchants in Africa and were devotees of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and patroness of merchants. Like Mami Wata devotees, Gujeratis place their account books or ledgers on their shrines as objects of veneration. And, as Alan Babb told me, they also submerge terra cotta statues of Lakshmi under water at the close of annual festivals—a practice strikingly similar to those that occur during some Mami Wata festivals (1985).

One young Igbo woman at Lagos spoke of her fear and fascination for the gods that the Hindu family she worked for kept in their house. She described in detail the prayers they conducted while seated with their legs crossed; the “points” (*bindu*) on their foreheads; their hand gestures; their shrines covered with pictures, statues, and books; the smell of incense; and the blue light of a candle that burned continuously. She also witnessed Hindu rites in which gifts of fruits and flowers were thrown into the sea along with the hair of a child. When she asked her employers the reasons for their actions, she was told, “the things that come from god must be returned to god.” She took this to mean that Indians come from the sea.

The Yoruba print seller described how he “befriended” an Indian man in Ghana:

He loved me very well, so he gave me some of his secrets about the pictures. He was telling me about the nature of every individual, about Lord Shiva, Lord Komara, Lord Krishna, the seven worlds under the earth. Every individual has a picture in his room. They worship with incense, candle, and all sorts of different kinds of things. Before a Hindu leaves the room early in the morning, he must face the picture, make meditation, pray, see the picture for himself before going out. These are called Mantra, the calling of the names of the pictures particular to them.

These observations and others have resulted in specific ritual practices among Mami Wata worshipers. In Nigeria and Togo, devotees light candles and burn incense during consultations with the spirit called “meditations.” One Mina Mami Wata priest displays a photograph of himself taken during his initiation in which he is seated on a Muslim prayer mat in lotus position wearing a turban and signing a *mudra* (plate 14).

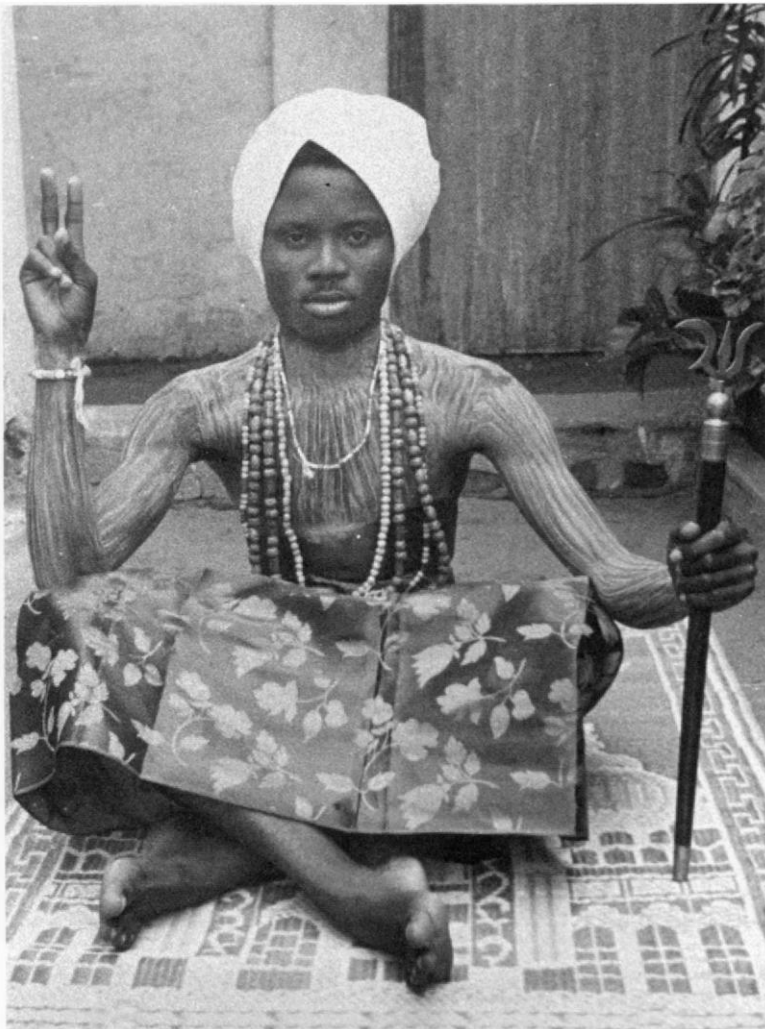
European conventions are also imaged in Mami Wata rites. In Atakpame, Togo, Mami Wata devotees have devised a European-style dance to attract their spirit. It is known as *Gran’bal*, a gentle ballroom-style dance often performed by couples, which takes place, appropriately, on Friday and Saturday nights. Followers also describe Mami Wata’s preference for slow “blues” tunes, highlife, and especially guitar music, a theme that extends to Nigeria as evidenced in a song by the popular bandleader and composer Victor Uwaifo:

If you see Mami Wata, oh,  
never, never run away  
Mami Wata loves music, oh,  
guitar boy,  
never, never, run away.

Among the Mina of Togo, European elements are juxtaposed with Hindu and African ones. In the process, all three are transformed to create a

novel ritual. On the day of La Table Sainte (the Sanctified Table), Mami Wata was honored first with rites based on indigenous practices, then a dressing sequence with Hindu and European elements, and finally with a European-style banquet. The day began with prayers, blessings, and songs performed for Mami Wata and her retinue of water spirits and other deities installed at the "House of the Holy Trinity." Meanwhile, water was mixed in a glass with talcum powder and poured on the ground. Some of the infusion was then shared among the worshipers. During a second prayer, the priest poured ginger ale on the ground, shared it around, and then tossed cowrie shells to learn the spirit's response. He broke apart a hard-boiled egg and spread the pieces on the altar, which was loaded with perfume bottles, talcum powder, eggs, and water from the well in the compound. Cleanliness, whiteness, and sweetness permeated the scene.

Songs accompanied the sacrifice of a white goat and chickens. Their blood was poured into a bowl. More chicken sacrifices followed, but this time the priest slit their necks and tossed them on the ground, intently watching their death throes to interpret the messages from Mami Wata. Satisfied that the signs were auspicious, he proceeded with the final chicken offering, whose blood was poured into a concreted hole in the ground that constituted the altar of Sapata, deity of contagious disease, particularly smallpox. During these proceedings, various Mami Wata followers went into possession trance and began to dance.



14. Formal portrait of a Mami Wata devotee signing a Hindu mudra as he sits in a lotus position on a Muslim mat. Togo, Mina, 1975. (Photographer unknown)

15. *Synthesizing images from a variety of sources, a devotee creates the appearance of Mami Wata by using a black wig; a Western-style dress of imported fabric with a sari-like sash over the left shoulder; jewelry on her upper arms, wrists, and ankles; long necklaces symbolic of the celestial serpent Dan; Hindu bindu on her forehead and feet; a brass snake in her right hand; and a trident in her left. She is seated on a traditional sacred stool that has been placed on a Muslim prayer rug. Togo, Mina, 1975. (Photo by Henry J. Drewal)*



The morning of prayer, sacrifice, song, and possession trance was but a prelude to the climactic rite in honor of Mami Wata—the Day of the Sanctified Table banquet. What better way to attract the spirit and make her feel at home than to prepare an elaborate banquet table in her honor? As her altars are tables, it is fitting that her festival conclude at the dinner table with an elegantly arranged evening meal.

The preparations for such an elaborate occasion took most of the afternoon. Priests, new initiates as well as old, underwent an elaborate toilet. They began by putting on perfume, cologne, and talcum powder painted in lines over the upper torso, arms, and legs. Face makeup was completed with a “point” on the forehead in imitation of the Hindu bindu.<sup>9</sup> The priests also donned: (1) bright European- or sari-style dresses of imported fabric with floral or striped patterns; (2) wigs of straight, black hair which



16. Dressed in a sari-style garment, a statue of Nanayo in lotus position presides at the head of the banquet table. A cobra head is spread out over her right shoulder and her arm uplifted in a mudra-like gesture. Togo, Mina, 1975. (Photo by Margaret Thompson Drewal)

they either wrapped in a white headtie or bedecked with costume jewelry and strings of beads; and, (3) much jewelry—earrings, anklets, armllets, bracelets, rings, and long, multicolored necklaces associated with Dan, the rainbow serpent deity who is Mami Wata's constant companion (plate 15). Like the garments depicted in the Indian prints, those of these Mami Wata devotees are draped over the left shoulder. Prior to the banquet, the devotees sat on a sacred stool for formal portraits, holding emblems of the water spirits—a bronze snake and a trident whose three prongs are said to symbolize the serpent, the path, and the moon. The trident, it may be recalled, is featured prominently in the “Densu” print.

The dressing complete, the priest led his initiates out of the courtyard to find their places at the sanctified table—a long banquet table covered in white linen and place settings of silverware, dishes, and glasses. A statue of Nanayo, the guardian Mami Wata spirit of the House of the Holy Trinity, presided at the head of the table (plate 16). The sculpture, done by an Ewe artist, captures a Hindu ritual gesture (mudra) and depicts the figure seated in the lotus position. The posture, forehead mark, and piled hairdo, together with the hooded cobra above the shoulder, all suggest the carver was influenced by Hindu prints similar to one known as Bhole Shankar. Nanayo's flowery garment echoes the saris shown in the prints and those worn by the devotees.

The participants danced counterclockwise around the table before they sat down (plate 17). The meal began with a benediction followed by the first course of fresh green salad. While many of the devotees valiantly tried

to adopt the palate and table manners of their exotic spirit, some found it impossible to eat raw vegetables, which they consider “bush that only animals consume.” As unobtrusively as possible, one elderly woman removed her plate and quickly raked the salad onto the ground under the table. Others poked at theirs awkwardly with knives or spoons until servers cleared the first course and brought the next. Sweet carbonated drinks were served while the initiates struggled with their utensils to eat the series of European dishes that constituted Mami Wata’s banquet. Conversation seemed stilted and subdued in the formal atmosphere, yet, when the ritual repast finally came to an end, most seemed pleased with their efforts at recreating and sharing a “proper” meal with their spirit.

Despite the complexity and diversity of Mami Wata beliefs and performances, certain widespread, transcultural patterns emerge. Mami Wata devotees objectify the Other through analyses and interpretations. Their data are based on direct observation of the attitudes and actions of the Other, including both secular and religious activities. For example, one Ewe devotee observed that Mami Wata spirits flock to the Hotel Tropicana in Togo each year in order to lie out in the sun or to sit staring out at the sea for hours on end. He was referring to French and German tourists on packaged holidays organized by the hotel. When I asked how he knew they were Mami Wata spirits, he simply told me that if I went there I would see for myself. Other actions invested with new meanings include the personal toilet (the use of facial powder, cologne, and perfume); reading, writing, and eating habits; table manners; and such devotional rites as lighting candles, ringing bells, singing hymns, and chanting mantras. The mundane actions of some become highly symbolic and meaningful to others.

Likewise, the products of foreign cultures, such as prints, books, sales

17. *Before sitting down to a formal, five-course French-style meal in Mami Wata’s honor, worshipers dance around her banquet table. At the head of the table is a carved image of the Mami Wata spirit, Nanayo. Togo, Mina, 1975. (Photo by Margaret Thompson Drewal)*



catalogs, pamphlets, films, and trade items are viewed, read, analyzed, and reinterpreted in order to be incorporated into already existing frameworks. In the end, the syntheses express the identity and concerns of the interpreters, not those of the producers. With this kind of knowledge, often processed in dreams and trances, Mami Wata adherents create sacred places and perform rituals to praise and appeal to their spirit.

Certain paraphernalia are widespread, especially mirrors, combs, and jewelry. Because of their prominence in mermaid lore and imagery as well as their reflective, waterlike surface, mirrors have become ritual instruments for attracting and controlling a vain and unpredictable spirit—whether in Togo, Nigeria, or Zaire. They therefore become essential shrine furniture too. Candles, flowers, incense, perfumes, powders, and other sweet and fragrant things such as fruits, soft drinks, and candies also persist widely in Mami Wata circles and are considered crucial for ritual performances. Added to these are other Mami Wata items: snakes, fish, shells, waterfowl, and other water-related objects like paddles, nets, and canoes.

Reading and writing messages and the use of books, notepads, and sheets of paper denote an adaptation of foreign communication modes. An early indication of the significance Africans attached to writing in their first encounters with Europeans was recorded in John Atkins's journal of his 1721 voyage. Near the Sierra Leonean coast, he described how "making *Paper speak* (as they call it) is a miracle" (Atkins 1970:64). In Zaire, paintings of the mermaid by Samba are frequently covered with texts describing the artist's conversations with the spirit (see Hollburg and Sievernich 1979:129) and, in Nigeria and Togo, Mami Wata worshipers write notes to their spirit and receive messages in the same form. Writing has thus become a ritual act, part of Mami Wata performance. Other means of communication are drawn from newer Western technology—the telephone, airplane, and motorcar help to connect the great distances between Mami Wata's abodes in the oceans and on African soil.

Dreams and visions also play a crucial role in shaping ritual actions from Liberia to Zaire and perhaps beyond. They are primary sources for communication between spirit and follower. The early morning "witching hour" when humans encounter the enticing *mamba muntu* of Zaire (the time is shown in popular painting on a wristwatch worn by a mermaid) marks dream time for countless Mami Wata devotees across West Africa. Certain themes in dreams recur almost everywhere and appear to derive from a shared mermaid mythology: water voyages and the beautiful yet cold European siren enticing humans, holding out the promise of sexual gratification and/or enormous riches.

Mami Wata worshipers perform their constructions of the Other in the ways they create sacred spaces and ritual action. In possession performances, Mami Wata mediums swim with their arms and speak in quasi-pidgin tongues as they relate their long journeys by boat, canoe, or car to come from distant waters such as the Indian Ocean. Devotees write notes, speak with Mami Wata on the phone, dance in a European ballroom style, play the guitar, sing hymns, and prepare lavish banquets in her honor. All of these acts are bridges to Mami Wata, bringing her ethos into the world of her followers. Not that these worshipers emulate Europeans or Indians in their daily lives, but rather they ritualize certain behavior in order to get in touch with their water spirit of foreign origins.

While some themes can be found everywhere, others are specific to certain areas for cultural or historical reasons (see Drewal 1988). Mami Wata is linked to the rainbow deity complex among the Mina, Ewe, Aja,

Fon, Yoruba, and Igbo in West Africa. The rainbow is regarded as a celestial serpent or, more specifically, the Royal Python. As a spirit, the rainbow controls the waters of the sky and unites them with the waters on earth, while Mami Wata dominates the seas and other bodies of water. Mami Wata followers therefore consider them an inseparable pair. The iconography of the European snake charmer print perfectly reflected indigenous beliefs in this area about rainbows, water snakes, and water spirits. In the print, a multicolored python is shown arching like the rainbow over the head of the snake charmer. Thus, imported talcum powder containers with rainbow motifs are favorite decorations for Mami Wata shrines, uniting a sweet-smelling foreign product and an indigenous symbol of the Royal Python (plate 13, right front corner). The print, then, contributed to reshaping the rainbow complex and extending it to include a foreign spirit.

As Mami Wata followers shape their practice, they select fragments from foreign cultures and invest them with new meanings to create sacred symbols and performances that will appeal to their vain and potentially troublesome spirit. Everything is reshaped, resymbolized, and re-presented in order to control and exploit a force that holds out the hope of wealth and well-being in an Africa that, as Africans understand, is still controlled to a large degree by external social, economic, and political forces.

Inspired by mermaids, snake charmers, and Hindu deities as well as indigenous ideas concerning water spirits, Africans from Senegal to Tanzania are evolving a vital and dynamic faith. This transcultural phenomenon suggests that many African belief systems have the capacity to respond to, to shape, and to incorporate new elements in building on existing concepts and practices. They are open, flexible, and incorporative rather than closed, rigid, and conservative. It is perhaps the divination process, a pervasive feature in many African religions, as it is in Mami Wata, that may account in part for this dynamism. Divination opens up religious systems to theoretically countless possibilities (see Drewal 1984). A spirit such as Mami Wata, whose lack of social ties sanctions alternatives to inherited status and wealth, provides more options. And dreams offer still further possibilities. Assimilating data from these diverse sources, Mami Wata devotees construct meaningful rites. As the Yoruba print seller remarked, "We began to study their pictures, read their books, and move near them to learn their secrets." The process he describes is one of active interpretation, adaptation, and re-creation—not reproduction. Indeed, when Mami Wata worshipers "mirror" their spirit, they are really inventing her. It is this inventiveness that transforms belief and practice and forges new ideologies, which shape the world of Mami Wata devotees.

### *Postscript*

Invention seems to have few limits, as evidenced in this news item from Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Ruth Stone sent it to me from Saudi Arabia, where it later appeared in *The Saudi Gazette* (1 June 1985):

#### "MERMAID" JAILED FOR FRAUD

A deformed teenager who posed as a legendary African mermaid with the power to multiply banknotes has been jailed here for fraud.

Fatou Sidibe, who is just 82 cms tall, has no legs and her withered arms look rather like flippers. She worked with a gang of crooks



from her home country, Mali, and was known variously as the goddess of the waters, the siren of the lagoon and “Mammi wata.”

Her accomplices lured gullible customers to the edge of a lagoon at nightfall and made them wait for hours until the mermaid put in an appearance, wearing a fluorescent dress and with her long hair flowing round her shoulders.

She would take their money and tell them to come back the next day.

## Notes

1. I am pleased to acknowledge generous financial support for research among the Ewe, Mina, Aja, Yoruba, and Igbo in 1975, 1977/78, and 1982 provided by The National Endowment for the Humanities (grant #s F77-42 and RO-20072-81-2184) and Cleveland State University, as well as institutional support from the Nigerian Museum, Obafemi Awolowo University, and the University of Ibadan which provided research affiliations. Archival work in Europe in the summers of 1980 and 1984 was funded by grants from Cleveland State University.
2. Talbot (1967:309) cites an origin myth for masked dances in honor of water spirits among the Kalabari Ijo which links them with Europeans. And Jones (1937:79) notes the Igbo belief that Europeans originated from the water. For more on Mami Wata art and beliefs among the Igbo see Drewal (1988).
3. In Zaire, mermaid (*mamba muntu*) lore holds that if a man is lucky enough to acquire one of her tokens (a lock of hair or her mirror) while she is resting on the shore, he will see her soon after in a dream. In exchange for her belongings, a vow of silence, and complete devotion, he will become fabulously rich (Fabian 1978:319). Mami Wata beliefs in Liberia seem to be identical (Wintrob 1970).
4. One Mami Wata group in Igbo country calls itself the Harriet Vocal Mermaid Society. The manifestation of Mami Wata through her voice seems related to communication with her by means of foreign technology—specifically the telephone. From such widely separated areas as Ibibioland in Nigeria and Zaire, telephones figure prominently in interactions with the spirit. In the former, a long thin rope from a carving of Mami Wata on a pole extends to the worshiper’s house. “This is called a Mammy Wata telephone, for it is claimed that the priestess is warned by this means of any stranger coming into the compound, as well as the purpose of their visit” (Salmons 1977:11). In Zaire, paintings of the mermaid show her telephone perched on a rock with the cord going down into a pot and then into the water (Eckhardt 1979:129).
5. Traditionally, a number of signs or “marks” identify someone touched by Mami Wata—for example, erratic behavior; dreams of water, whites, and wealth; journeys to bodies of water; and pressure on one’s back. Mami Wata also puts physical marks on her followers’ bodies.
6. The edition illustrated was printed in Bombay, India, by the Shree Ram Calendar Company in 1955 to copy an earlier version sent to them by a trader in Kumasi, Ghana. During 1955/56, 12,000 copies (10" × 14") were sent to this trader and another in Kumasi “without changing a line even from the original” (Manager, Shree Ram Calendar Company, letter dated 17 June 1977). While the inventiveness of African artists sometimes makes it difficult to be certain, I discern the print’s influence in at least 14 countries and 41 cultures.
7. One Yoruba man, recalling the first time he saw the print during his youth in Lagos (1921), admitted that he nearly “peed in his pants” when he beheld the striking beauty, the long flowing hair, and the snakes of Mami Wata.
8. Even where elaborate rituals for Mami Wata have not evolved, as in Zaire, the picture of the mermaid is regarded by its owners as a talisman/charm that will aid in the attainment of wealth (Jules-Rosette 1977:126).
9. The belief that Mami Wata puts marks on her chosen may have been inspired in part by the proliferation of Hindu images showing *bindu* on people’s foreheads. In an Ewe sculpture of Densu based on the Hindu print illustrated in plate 11, even the three dogs have “points” on their heads.

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