
Mami Wata appears in many guises throughout Henry John Drewal’s two recent publications examining the water spirit and the arts she has inspired. Divinity, nomad, trickster, benefactor, predator; depending upon the cultural and geographic context, Mami Wata is each and all of these things throughout *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* and *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*. While few universals can describe the spirit through her many incarnations, her power to seduce devotees and non-devotees alike emerges time and again in communities where Mami Wata has left her mark.

In the preface to “Sacred Waters,” Drewal describes his own seduction by Mami Wata and the subsequent three decades of personal research that has culminated in these two
collaborative projects. Quoting a journal of Mami Wata memories, Drewal recounts his personal “subjection... by the object of his affection,” depicting a long-developing and deeply held personal and academic relationship with the divinity that moves beyond scholarship and into the realm of devotion. The author has researched the divinity on three continents, named two sail boats after her, constructed altars in her honor, and even participated in the annual mermaid parade in Coney Island. The obvious affection and commitment Drewal holds for Mami Wata is reflected in the two volumes, both of which represent significant contributions to the growing body of scholarship exploring the water spirit and her devotees.

Drewal presents Mami Wata not so much as a fixed object of religious veneration but as a constantly changing instance of encounter. Throughout his writing on the topic, Drewal emphasizes Mami Wata’s placement at the site of engagement between different cultures, traditions, and ways of living. The water spirit and her numerous incarnations never exist within a vacuum. Instead, Drewal argues, they are actively formed through a continuous process of interaction and reinvention. Consequently, the visual practices that emerge from these moments of contact are not indicative of some unified and “authentic” culture – a notion that Drewal and the other authors are quick to identify as fictitious – but products of cultural hybridity and translation. Drewal introduces the concept early in both pieces, writing, “When people objectify others, they are constructing themselves. In the process, [they] resymbolize aspects of cultural others, translating and transforming them into our [their] symbols on [their] own terms.” The essays in both works explore Mami Wata’s “trans-ness” in various geographic and cultural contexts, demonstrating how the basic concept of the water deity has been and continues to be creatively reworked to accommodate distinct lived realities.

The multi-disciplinary approach of both books fits the subject well, allowing for a scope of analysis with appropriate breadth and diversity. This is especially true of “Sacred Waters,” which contains forty-six essays by artists, writers, filmmakers, scholars, and devotees who explore the visual tradition of Mami Wata as it is found in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Drewal has collected an impressive ensemble of topics that are treated from a variety of scholarly perspectives, including anthropology, history, visual culture, and art history. Some pieces are written from first-hand practitioners of Mami Wata traditions, providing the sort of direct engagement often missing from similar treatments. Beyond the visuals in the book itself, “Sacred Waters” includes a DVD supplying additional images, music and poetry recordings, and performance videos. Given the labile nature of Mami Wata and the cultural practices surrounding her, this approach provides a versatile perspective to explore the spirit in the numerous waters in which she resides.

The essays are loosely organized into five overarching themes, including wealth and morality, artistic agency, Mami Wata as artist’s muse, water spirits in the diaspora, and exploration of the spirit’s movement between various cultural and historical contexts. Drewal presents these categories in a pithy and illuminating introduction that sets the tone of the piece while preparing the reader for the abundance of information that follows. Sadly, his organizational program is not born out through the rest of the collection. Beyond Drewal’s introduction, the essays are not clearly separated into their individual themes. The problem is exacerbated by the sometimes arbitrary classification of the essays themselves. Occasionally, the
individual pieces seem shoe-horned into their respective themes without apparent consideration for the essay’s content. In a collection of this size, this sporadic lack of organizational focus can lead to divergent and sometimes confusing passages. Fortunately, the stronger essays maintain the central thrust of Drewal’s program, even during those rare moments when the larger piece loses overall coherence.

Of those essays exploring Mami Wata as a locus of material acquisition and moral agency, Barbara Frank’s piece on the shift in attitudes toward wealth, consumption, and community in West African spiritual practice is especially engaging. Frank situates Mami Wata in the broader context of West African spirit beliefs. She explores the constantly changing relationship between devotees and “wealth-owning spirits,” illustrating how spiritual identity and economic ambition are often intertwined at the site of religious practice. Bogumil Jewsiewicki’s essay also stands out, exploring a particular incarnation of water spirit in the Congo. Referred to as Mamba Muntu, this female spirit grants wealth and prestige to her male devotees, but at an often terrible price. Jewsiewicki deftly ties the fluctuating relevance of Mamba Muntu to recent Congolese history, shifting political realities, and the growing presence of Christianity in the region. Both essays effectively demonstrate how Mami Wata and other religious entities often reflect the material realities of everyday life while providing devotees with a sense of economic agency, which is otherwise absent.

The second theme of the book explores Mami Wata’s travels between the ancient and the recent, the indigenous and the foreign, and the local and the global. This section is the largest of the book, comprised of fourteen essays that follow Mami Wata as she moves among various cultural, historical, and geographical contexts. It is also the most diffuse and least focused of the themes, leading to some perplexing additions that could have easily been left out for the sake of brevity and cohesion. The common thread through the pieces is often difficult to grasp and the entire section could have benefited from more strenuous editing. This comes as no small disappointment considering that the theme of cultural and historical nomadism adheres closest to Drewal’s central thesis.

Fortunately, the section contains strong individual essays to buoy the theme and illustrate Mami Wata’s propensity for border crossing, migration, and uniquely local incarnations. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen’s exploration of hair in visual culture and spiritual practice throughout the Oguta Lake region draws fascinating parallels between the original Mami Wata chromolithograph and contemporary hair motifs in Southeastern Nigeria. Osa D. Egonwa’s critical reassessment of Mami Wata scholarship also stands out. While most academic literature emphasizes Mami Wata’s “foreignness” as a product of cultural synthesis during the colonial encounter, Egonwa argues that she is essentially indigenous in nature. As “old wine in a new skin,” Mami Wata is a modern form of ancient water spirit that existed upon the continent far before Europeans arrived. His piece provides a fascinating counterpoint to other authors – Drewal included – who accentuate Mami Wata’s contemporary hybridity over her earlier cultural lineages.

The third section of the book contains essays that examine art and social agency. As a spirit who is believed to have direct, aggressively held ties with the material world, Mami Wata is often called upon to affect change in social realities when other avenues are exhausted. The
essays of this section investigate specific instances in which Mami Wata visual practice provides a system of action which individuals use to impact their world.

The majority of these pieces approach Mami Wata as the site of tense religious struggles between water spirit devotees and adherents of Christianity and Islam. In her essay, Birgit Meyer explores manifestations of Mami Wata in Pentecostal sermons and videos in southern Ghana. This context sees the water spirit portrayed as a temptress and a trickster, seducing otherwise devout Christians with promises of sex and wealth only to destroy them in the end. Meyer demonstrates how Pentecostals appropriate Mami Wata imagery to provide a warning to those who would stray from the path of Christian virtue. Jill Salmons discusses a different form of agency in her essay exploring an Ogoni Mami Wata association in the Niger Delta. Since the 1990s, the group has sought compensation from Shell and the Nigerian government for contaminating the Delta’s natural environment and exploiting the region’s oil reserves. Through an exploration of the group’s history, Salmons investigates the role of Mami Wata visual practice as the focus of a developing Ogoni national identity and a unified site of social protest.

The final theme of the collection addresses Mami Wata and other water spirit belief practices throughout the Atlantic. These essays explore manifestations of the spirit in the context of the diaspora, examining some of the diverse ways Mami Wata has appeared in geographical and cultural contexts outside of Africa itself. Marilyn Houlberg discusses one of these contexts in “Arts for the Water Spirits of Haitian Vodou,” a survey of water divinities and their artistic representations in the creolized African community of Haiti. Like many of the essays in the collection, Houlberg’s piece examines the effect of the 1885 Mami Wata chromolithograph upon local spiritual practices. In Haiti, the image has been used to represent both the Afro-Catholic Saint Marta la Domidora and Danbala, a snake divinity among a wider pantheon of Vodou water spirits. Houlberg’s treatment and the other essays of this section effectively demonstrate the ways Mami Wata has been translated through numerous unique belief systems across vast stretches of geographic space.

While the large scope and spotty organization of “Sacred Waters” sometimes obscures the book’s impressive depth of analysis, Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas presents similar material in a tighter and more visually captivating manner. Produced as the accompanying catalog for an exhibition organized by Drewal for the Fowler Museum, the book explores Mami Wata in her African and diasporic contexts as well as her significance to contemporary art practices. In contrast to “Sacred Waters,” the catalog benefits from a narrower focus and handsomely reproduced visuals. The majority of the piece’s twelve chapters are written by Drewal himself, imparting a clear research narrative and lucid authorial vision lacking in the larger collection of essays.

Drewal begins the catalog with a brief but effective survey of Mami Wata related art practices. His treatment is loosely chronological, adopting what Jan Vansina refers to as “a streaming model” of history. Drewal argues, “Such an approach considers the dynamics of multiple sources; diffusions and dispersals as opposed to independent inventions; confluence, divergence, and reconvergence; depths in contrast to surfaces; and currents, ebbs and flows.” Water metaphors aside, the tactic allows Drewal to approach Mami Wata as a matrix of
different art histories and social agencies, a constellation of intersecting belief practices and diverse visual cultures.

Following this tact, his survey excavates connections between ancient water deities in Sierra Leone and the appearance of European mermaid imagery during the colonial age, between representations of mudfish in Yoruba iconography and the 1885 snake charmer lithograph, which has provided the basis of many modern incarnations of Mami Wata herself. This fluid approach is again put to good use in the Drewal’s concluding chapter exploring contemporary artists who engage with Mami Wata. A diverse group of practitioners, including Bruce Onobrakpeya, Twins Seven Seven, and Gerald Duane Coleman, are introduced in brief descriptions of their lives and their unique working relationships with the water deity.

The staggering range of Mami Wata visual cultures introduced by “Sacred Waters” and “Mami Wata” testify to the breadth and complexity of African water deities and their accompanying devotional practices. While “Sacred Waters” is not free of organizational flaws, it presents a diverse and intricate subject with ambition and depth. “Mami Wata,” by narrowing its focus to a comparably small body of artistic practices, emerges as the more accessible and compelling of the two works. Small complaints aside, Drewal has provided a great service by compiling a number of diverse perspectives that bring the full, elaborate scope of the Mami Wata phenomenon into focus.

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