

## MERMAIDS AND END-TIME JEZEBELS: NEW TALES FROM OLD CALABAR

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Moving to Calabar, the capital of Nigeria's Cross River State, in 1979 to take up a post as lecturer in Religious Studies at the University entailed more than a shift in my professional and cultural landscape. It meant leaving behind the great south-western city of Ibadan with its encroaching savanna to adopt a more verdant and riverine environment in the east. Walking the quaint and historical streets of Old Calabar one's perspective was dominated by the magnificent Calabar River as it snaked its way to the Bight of Biafra some twenty-five miles to the south (FIG 1). On the other side of this small rain-soaked city was the quieter Great Kwa River, bordered by dense mangrove vegetation so clearly visible as one approached by air (FIG 2). Further to the west could be found the complex, winding Cross River after which the state was named.

The move to Calabar also meant learning about a traditional pantheon which accorded a more prominent place to *ndem*, the mainly aquatic spirits which served as tutelary deities of the Efik people. They were prayed to for blessings, fertility, and forgiveness. I was told that they tended to possess people with lighter skins, hence the cult devotees usually wore white. I read missionary accounts which speak of albino girls being offered as sacrifices at Parrot Island just down the river from Calabar. Yet when I started attending local chieftaincy celebrations or royal burials (while not forgetting modern rituals such as the opening of new banks), it was the *Ekpe* or traditional secret society masqueraders who tended to dominate with their powerful costumes and movements. As Calabar's fortunes shifted from fishing to trading in the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Ekpe* rituals had gained ascendancy. Today, this secret society is a shadow of its former political self, functioning as the last bastion of Efik traditional culture and communal organization, its knowledge and hierarchy accessed only via costly and esoteric initiation rituals. Yet the continuing relationship of the Calabar peoples (mainly Efik, but also Ejagham and Ekoi communities) to the ubiquitous waterways for their transportation and livelihood (in the late 1970s the port of Calabar was built) has ensured that the lore of the waters, and their pleasures and perils persist.

I remained for four years at the University of Calabar (1979-83); and this account is based on that period of my life, together with return visits every few years up until the present time. To refer to Mami Wata in this context is to some extent an over-simplification (and, arguably, a modernization) given the complexity of the Efik *ndem* pantheon in terms of numbers and gender (Hackett 1989: 28-32, 179-181). I am less interested in whether Mami Wata is a local or foreign spirit, or a (post)modern interpretation of an ancient belief (she strikes me as all of the above), but rather the links between old and new stories about water spirits in Calabar and beyond.<sup>1</sup> These stories of spirit-human relations provide insight into the contested images of water,

women and misfortune.<sup>2</sup> Addressing perennial concerns about wealth and sexuality, they find new life in the worldviews of modern-day pentecostal Christians with their elaborate and vivid spirit imaginary--that of a dualistic world inhabited by warring spiritual forces.

My memory fails me as to when I first heard of Mami Wata. It was perhaps the time when a motorized canoe traveling to neighboring Creek Town overturned in one of Calabar's torrential storms. Some survived, but of those who drowned it was said that Mami Wata had claimed another victim--luring him or her down to her watery kingdom. There was also talk of the canoe being capsized by a "sea cow" (or manatee, of which only a few remained in the area at that time according to my biologist friends). I was never very clear if this was considered to be a "manifestation" of Mami Wata but there seemed to be some link in people's minds.<sup>3</sup> Then there was the case of the niece of a Ghanaian colleague who slipped away from a family picnic at the Great Kwa Falls, a local beauty spot, and disappeared mysteriously into the watery depths never to return. The much publicized accidents which occurred during the building of the new port in the late seventies and early eighties were also attributed to the displeasure of Mami Wata at the occupation of her realm.<sup>4</sup> The port authorities had to resort to the traditional means of sacrifice to continue with their work. By this time such happenings made the local newspapers, such as the now defunct *Nigerian Chronicle*, conveying mixed messages of anachronism yet existential reality, as well as alterity (Battestini 1991).

Closer to home, on campus, there was a student of mine whose behavior started giving cause for concern. He would wander in and out of classrooms with a wild-eyed look. Attempts to heal his mental condition failed at both the local psychiatric hospital as well as a local spiritual church. His worsening mental condition was explained to me by the students as possession by Mami Wata. Likewise, a female student in our department, desperate, yet unable, to conceive a child, was cast in the same light. Women sometimes initiate relationships with personal water spirits in order to overcome infertility. These spirits have a reputation for jealousy and expensive tastes. They can be blamed for a variety of physical, material, and emotional problems if their demands are not met. Alternatively, it is believed that they may seek out a "spouse" and reward the person with worldly success but deprive them of progeny and happiness in marriage. It was only later that I read Flora Nwapa's 1966 novel, *Efuru*, on this intriguing subject.

Having been exposed to Mami Wata stories I now felt the need to see her images and accouterments of power. An Ibibio student took me to the mainland one weekend to visit a Mami Wata priestess. She proudly showed us her Mami Wata "telephone"--a long wire strung between two poles, on the top of one sat a boat with Mami Wata at the helm and her retinue behind. The spirit figure had long hair and a light skin. We were shown the priestess' "spirit husband" (a merman as opposed to mermaid). He too had light pink skin and his torso was encircled with a snake. His altar was full of white objects, such as talcum powder and a statue of the Virgin Mary. Regrettably it was several years before I came across the first scholarly accounts of Mami Wata symbolic representations and their provenance (see, eg. Salmons 1977).

It was only when I returned to Calabar in 1991 and attended a chieftaincy installation where the *ndem* performers were resplendent (perhaps because it was a woman being installed) (FIG 3),

that I understood the adornments and movements of the principal dancer (FIG 4). By then I had read Henry Drewal's influential theory that images of Mami Wata in the region can be traced to an early German chromolithograph of a female Indian snake-charmer which began circulating in West and Central Africa at the turn of the century, and more extensively from the 1950s onwards (Drewal 1988). He further argues that the alien, exotic objects (such as talcum powder, Virgin Mary statues, sunglasses, etc.) which often form part of the shrine complexes of Mami Wata worshipers are used by the people to define themselves and address problems of self-identity (Drewal 1996) (cf. Wendl 1990). I also liked Margaret Thompson Drewal's argument that the snake-charmer image proved popular as many local artists saw it as Mami Wata's "photograph" (Drewal 1990:42f.).

I once, myself, tried unsuccessfully to take Mami Wata's photograph. It was in fact a place associated with the local spirit. We were returning from a trip out of Calabar with some Ibibio friends and they casually pointed out this small cabin, modern in appearance, sitting back from the highway on cleared land. They indicated, with some amusement, that it was a "house" built for Mami Wata and that no-one lived in it. I asked if I could stop and photograph it. They cooperated and I went home in the belief that I had captured this special dwelling on film. When the film was eventually developed some weeks later, the images that I most wanted to see were simply not there! This strange occurrence did not surprise my friends, however Presbyterian they were. I do, however, retain an image of that "dwelling" in my mind's eye.

Stories such as those alluded to above concerning particular types of misfortune, namely mysterious drownings, infertility, and mental disorder and their attribution to the activities of Mami Wata might have been expected to decline with the substantial growth of Christianity in Calabar since the first missionaries arrived in 1846. Naturally people have negotiated, either as individuals or as congregations, which aspects of their "traditional heritage" they wish to retain, amend or reject. On the whole, the mainline, mission-related churches (e.g. the Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, and Roman Catholic churches) have been more forgiving and accommodating of local, indigenous practices than have the newer evangelical and pentecostal movements which began to take off in Calabar in the mid-1980s (Hackett 1989: 197f.). They are characterized by an emphasis on individual salvation, conservative piety, and an exclusivist approach to other churches which they do not consider to have "Bible-believing" foundations. The pentecostal churches and ministries accord a greater place to the works of the Holy Spirit, and by extension, to negative spiritual forces whether conceived in the form of Satan, witchcraft, ancestral, aquatic, or nature spirits.<sup>5</sup> They have developed specific deliverance ministries, through publications, audio cassettes, and special healing services as an extension of their often elaborate demonologies.<sup>6</sup> It is their concern with the mermaid or "marine" spirits that is apposite here.

When I returned to Calabar in the summer of 2001, and enquired about the current status of Mami Wata beliefs, I was told by my well-connected Efik women friends that most of their acquaintances considered Mami Wata to be a thing of the past, *except* if they belonged to one of the newer pentecostal churches. Naturally their answer intrigued me and I requested further explanation.<sup>7</sup> They claimed that the newer churches are perpetuating, if not reviving, beliefs in

aquatic spirits as sources of people's problems, and that the appropriate spiritual remedies must be sought. These churches also make people change their names (to Blessing, Grace, Andy, etc.) if they have mermaid spirit connotations, such as Ekanem, Ndem, Andem, Ekpenyon, Efiok, Bassey, and Oku. Parents with "witchcraft" or "satanic" connections are blamed for giving their offspring such names.

I did not have the time to check out one of these Calabar pentecostal churches but a few days later in Lagos I was able to attend one of the fastest growing pentecostal or deliverance ministries known as Mountain of Fire and Miracles. It nestles behind the back gate of the University of Lagos in Akoka, and has no visible structures from the road. Yet somehow, a hundred thousand people cram into the various halls, alleyways and rooms that form their rabbit warren-like compound. The founder and General Overseer of the movement, Dr. D.K. Olukoya--a British-trained micro-biologist--has a prolific output of magazines and books. My eyes alighted upon one publication in particular, *Fire in the Word*, with its theme for the week, "Disgracing Marine Spirits."<sup>8</sup> (FIG 5) It contains a five-page transcription of a message delivered by Dr. Olukoya at a previous service. It first identifies biblical references which (could) refer to marine spirits, and their "half fish, half human" form, then addresses the problems that beset those who get involved with women or men "from the water," namely promiscuity and polygamy, as well as anger and frequent dreams about water. Olukoya insists that this type of spirit is one of the most potent and dangerous, yet often ignored as people more readily attribute their "lack of success" to "earth spirits." Marine spirits operate by seducing people through fine clothes (notably "wet look" dresses), food, jewelry, dancing and music (FIG 6). Such spirits are also found in hairdressing salons (the spirits purportedly favor particular styles such as braids) and Chinese restaurants (because of the marine symbol frequently advertizing the latter).<sup>9</sup> One can also be "polluted" by one's parents if they worshiped Yemoja, Olokun, or other types of water spirit. Churches that are situated near the river or beach and that baptize their members in water which is not clear to the bottom are also suspected of having links with such spirits. So too are those who visit streams or rivers for "cultural reasons."<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Olukoya claims that marine spirits try to control the economy (as most goods pass through the sea), and are responsible for the production of cosmetics and alcohol. Interestingly, he also attributes the environmental desolation in the riverine areas of Nigeria to these demonic powers (rather than to oil companies), as well as to "sexual looseness" whether in the form of adultery, pornography, lesbianism, incest or abortion.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Olukoya proposes various spiritual strategies for defeating these water spirits, such as declaring "holy war" on them and spreading a "prayer net" to trap them<sup>12</sup>. As one can see from the cover of the newsletter, two devilish mermaids (one is portrayed as a witch and the other a prostitute) and two fierce-looking mermen are being roasted alive by a ring of fire. Olukoya's ministry is, incidentally, renowned for its violent and aggressive spirituality (see Hackett 2003).<sup>13</sup>

Beliefs have long been common about the proximity of women to the spirit world, and hence their vulnerability (especially when pregnant). Similarly, social problems and moral dislocation have been readily attributed to women's independence and excessive embrace of modern forms of dress and behavior. But the framing of these fears in the form described above raises two

interesting questions. First, the fact that these “marine agents” are now able to penetrate the hallowed and presumed safe territory of the pentecostal church generates new fears and new quests for protection. As I was told in hushed tones by one deliverance specialist, so sophisticated are some of these newer “manifestations” of Mami Wata as virtuous church virgins, that they can manipulate through their charismatic charms not just the bodies but also the *minds* of men. He added that this type of spirit is the most dangerous and deceitful, and attacks pastors only.<sup>14</sup> Second, the maintenance, if not resurgence, of Mami Wata beliefs in these new religious contexts may be linked to millennialist claims that the increase in the number of “Jezebels” inviting the people of God to compromise with the world is “part of the operations of Satan and his demons in these last days.”<sup>15</sup>

To summarize: just as images and ideas about Mami Wata took on new form and life in contact with European commercial and colonial power and Hindu images, so too have the burgeoning pentecostal deliverance ministries provided new outlets for the recasting of traditional ideas about spirit possession by seductive and consumptive water spirits in a modern, Christian guise.<sup>16</sup> Further research is required on this interesting transposition in a variety of contexts to ascertain if it represents a more general trend. In the meantime, African theologians search for ways to counter this strong trend in pentecostalism to externalize rather than internalize evil.<sup>17</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen is particularly critical of the exoticization of Mami Wata by Western academics. See, e.g. her review of the children's book, *Mommi Watta: Spirit of the River* (by Virginia Castelman, 1995) on H-AfrLitCine May 1998, "Magic from an African River: Is Education Only a Dream for Girls in Africa?"
2. An excellent comparative study in this regard would be Bogumil Jewsiewicki's analysis of the Zairean popular painter, Chéri Samba (Jewsiewicki 1995). Samba's paintings explore and deride post-colonial Zairean urban society and its moral decay and political corruption. His depictions of prostitutes and mermaids symbolize "the story of the new power of the Independence of which the people were robbed" (p. 94). The white man, with his predilection for young Zairean women, signifies both moral and political evil. According to Jewsiewicki, he is "the equivalent of a male *mami wata*" (p. 96).
3. Allen Roberts notes that he came across stories of manatee and Mami Wata connections in the inland lakes while working in Chad in the 1960s. Communication on H-AFARTS, 17 April 2001. See also the "revelation" by Ghanaian scientists at the Institute of Aquatic Biology of the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research and the Wildlife Department that "the sea goddess reputed to be a source of absolute beauty and money could be the West African Manatee, an aquatic, herbivorous animal" ("Ghanaian Scientists Unravel Mystery Mermaid's Being," Panafrican News Agency, 5 April 2001).
4. Accidents at road bridges were also given this "sacrificial" interpretation as they were commonly attributed to the displeasure of water spirits.
5. Birgit Meyer's work, *Translating the Devil*, is the most thorough study of pentecostal demonology in an African context (Meyer 1999). Focused on Ewe pentecostal churches in eastern Ghana, her insightful analysis both historicizes images of the Devil and people's obsession with occult forces, and links these beliefs to their ambivalent attitudes to modernity. The centrality of "Satan's most erotic demon" and "most seductive agent" in the popular imagination of urban Accra (notably films and video-movies) points to the fantasies and fears associated with a modern way of life and "its global entanglements" (Meyer, this volume).
6. It is important to note that these movements are commonly sub-divided according to the orientation of the movement, i.e. deliverance, holiness, righteousness, prosperity, and "slain in the Spirit" ministries. Rev. Dr. Andrew T. Gbandeh-Mitta, personal communication, 14 August 2001.

7. I had actually raised the possibility of continuity between traditional ideas of mermaids and pentecostal fears of “marine agents” posing as virtuous, virginal choristers at a panel that I organized at the 1995 African Studies Association annual meeting in Orlando, entitled “Mami Wata: New Perspectives and Peregrinations” but did not pursue it at the time for lack of written data.

8. Sunday 22 - Saturday 28 April 2001.

9. Starbucks, with its (even more explicit) mermaid logo, has not yet reached Nigeria.

10. Greater detail on the operations of these spirits and their provenance can be found in (Olukoya 1999).

11. Strange sexual dreams and behavior are still commonly attributed by adolescents, notably in boarding school environments, to Mami Wata. Manza A. Agovi, personal communication, 15 November 2001. (Cf. Ogrizek 1981-82 for a French doctor’s psychoanalytical analysis of female hysteria, Mami Wata beliefs and communal healing in Congo and the Central African Republic).

12. Evangelist Victoria Eko’s widely read *Exposition on Water Spirits* recommends a “heavy dose of the scriptures” to keep the perils of these demonic spirits at bay (p. 57).

13. They have a useful website: [www.mountain-of-fire.com](http://www.mountain-of-fire.com).

14. Rev. Dr. Andrew T. Gbandeh-Mitta, personal communication, 14 August 2001. He is from Sierra Leone but lived in Lagos for ten years.

15. Interestingly, these are the words not of a man, but Lady Evangelist Bimpe Adekeye in the section, “Stumbling Blocks in Women Ministry [*sic*]” of her publication, *Sisters in the End Time Army* (Ibadan, n.d.) p.33. This publication was made available to me by Dr. Bolaji Bateye, whose research on women in the spiritual and pentecostal churches confirmed this phenomenon more widely. Personal communication, 21 July 2001. In light of the first question, the Jezebels that Adekeye is referring to are not the more obvious “street women” but “modern-day women preachers who go about with their bodies painted, putting on transparent, tight and short dresses, and with the kind of hairdos that look like that of harlots to seduce God’s people to sin and commit adultery in their hearts” (ibid.).

16. Gore and Nevadomsky focus more on the reception rather than the production of Mami Wata ideas and images, leading them to assert that there is more local agency and discontinuities in representation than Drewal’s analysis shows (Gore and Nevadomsky 1997). Certainly, their approach is more illuminating of the integration of Mami Wata beliefs and practices into present-day Christian communities. The research and video documentation by Kofi Asare Opoku and Kathleen O’Brien Wicker on an eastern Ghanaian Mami Wata shrine (“Priesthood and Ritual in Ghana”) also confirms this interpretation. Misty Bastian’s anthropological analysis of spiritual-human relationships as a commentary on kinship and alliance, and modern urban problems in

Nigeria, proves even more fruitful (Bastian 1997). Based on her research on divination in Sierra Leone, Rosalind Shaw emphasizes the importance of secrecy with regard to the capacities Temne women obtain from river spirits. Women are perceived by men as unknowable given their exogenous origins and they are likened to rivers (this volume).

17. See, for example, the special issue of *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 4,1 (June 2001) on "Gospel and Culture: Issues of Engagement."