

Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas.* Henry John Drewal, with contributions by Marilyn Houlberg, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Amy L. Noell, John W. Nunley, and Jill Salmons; Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2008. 227 pp.

Reviewed by Ellen Sieber

How do you study, much less collect and exhibit, a cultural phenomenon so pervasive that it defies capture? The editor and lead author of *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*, and its many contributors, have asked and answered those questions in a lively and informative volume. Water spirit, mermaid, serpent, decidedly and decisively female, Mami Wata twines herself through many eras, cultures, and continents, with attendant shifts in meaning and importance. Thus this book can explore pre-Christian beliefs of a southeastern Nigerian people (“Mammy Wata among the Annang Ibibio,” a contribution by Jill Salmons) and Internet sources (“Surfing Mami’s Virtual Wata: Mami Wata Resources on the Internet,” by Amy L. Noell) with equal relevance.

Studies of Africa and its diaspora(s) often hint at pure, frozen-in-time African origins for practices that later become amalgamated with other influences and traditions outside of Africa. In *Mami Wata*, and the exhibition with which it is partnered, Henry John Drewal and contributing scholars note that the African story of Mami Wata is itself one of cultural interaction, change, adaptation, and adoption; the possible origin of Mami lies in the first African-European encounters along the African coast, with variations in imagery and meaning added over the centuries through many other stimuli, both external and internal to Africa.

The book’s contents are divided into 12 chapters, seven of them written by Drewal, one each by the other contributors. In addition, Drewal’s introduction admirably captures the probable history and iconographic art history of Mami Wata, including one extremely influential image found on (take a breath) a 1955 Bombay reprint of an 1880s German print of a Southeast Asian snake-charming circus performer. Much of the rest of the book is comprised of chapters exploring different African or Western Atlantic locations in which water spirits—Mami Wata or her kin—are manifest. These contributions are based on fieldwork by the various authors, giving invaluable contextual depth to the objects and images presented.

The chapters on West Africa (by John W. Nunley, Salmons, and Drewal) demonstrate the geographic scope of water spirits in religion, from masquerade costumes and headdress in Sierra Leone to shrine sculptures and, again, masks from southeastern Nigeria. Other visual contexts—music CD covers, a healer’s signboard, a fan—reflect not just the pervasiveness of this imagery, but also the enmeshed nature of belief and culture in this part of the world. A chapter on late-20th century painting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo illustrates a theme of water spirit as siren, particularly in religiously and culturally diverse urban settings; author Bogumil Jewsiewicki delves into political history and local beliefs to interpret these works. Marilyn

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Houlberg contributes a chapter on the Haitian water spirit Lasirèn, another dangerous but potentially bountiful being, depicted in materials as varied as sequins and iron. Two chapters by Drewal complete the section on Western Hemisphere spirits: In the neighboring Dominican Republic, snake charmer imagery, clearly traced to that 1955 reprinted image, was transformed into depictions of Santa Marta la Dominadora, found in plaster statues, cards, and spray cans—the ritual paraphernalia of botanicas. And in Brazil, we see even more cross-cultural crosscurrents at work. From the introduction of Mami Wata by African slaves, through her subsequent identity in Brazil as Yemanjá—the Mother of Waters but also associated with the Catholic saint, Our Lady of Conception—then to Afro-Brazilians’ carrying her back to Africa in the 19th century to reunite with Mami Wata. Drewal records, with obvious delight, Yemanjá’s annual festival as celebrated in Bahia in the 1990s.

Given this depth and reach, and the degree of cultural sensitivity evident throughout, the overall organization of the volume is perplexing. “Part 1: Mami Wata in a Cultural Context” contains chapters on seven separate West and Central African locations, plus the aforementioned chapter on Internet sources included or perhaps tacked on. “Part 2: Mami’s Sisters in the African Atlantic” consists of three chapters, on Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Brazil. “Part 3: Mami Inspirations” contains one chapter, on contemporary artists of Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America. Why these divisions and titles? The geographic distinctions between Parts 1 and 2 are clear, other than the Internet appendage, but why “A Cultural Context” distinguishing African from New World studies, when so much of the book is enlivened by awareness of cultural fluidity and the importance of local meaning? Similarly, separating “contemporary artists” from other, often contemporaneous, artists whose work is featured elsewhere in the book seems arbitrary—though perhaps warranted by their own cultural context of art separated into its own fine niche.

With a book of such scope, it takes a powerful figure to remain dominant, and in this our central character succeeds grandly through a myriad of images of objects, paintings, and people, as well as through the written word. Creations in wood, fabric, beads, mosaic and painted glass, ranging from the flamboyant to the sublime are pictured on the book’s pages, and certainly make the reader want to see these objects first hand. The field photographs sparkle as well with vibrant colors and, especially in the masquerade images, a hint of the motion and music that have eluded capture.

A major challenge—and opportunity—for museum scholars and curators lies in examining and re-defining areas of study and collecting. In the past the focus was *on* the past, often perceived to be the disappearing past: a concept developed by pioneers of American museum anthropology such as Franz Boas, and not often critically re-examined until recently. Even now museums often focus on collecting items of “traditional” significance, whether those be African American quilts or Tibetan reliquaries. Scholarly focus on contemporary practice is a refreshing movement, and, as noted, presents an exciting opportunity for curators, as well. *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* exemplifies this focus, and also serves to remind curators that collections await us here and now: we have a responsibility to collect for the future, by developing collections which document today’s active cultural phenomena.

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